

Oak Trees and Angel Wings

by DJJ

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Summary: Complete. My first fanfic, a sequel dealing with a situation FFVIII leaves unresolved.

1. Default Chapter Title

> <meta name="ProgId"> Opening the pub door just a crack, Wedge spotted the patrol up on the station level. 4:30, his watch read, that Watts' information is impeccable, he thought. He turned to the bartender and said, " Here they come, you're up." The bartender nodded and r

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-Part 1-

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Opening the pub door just a crack, Wedge spotted the patrol up on the station level. 4:30, his watch read, that Watts' information is impeccable, he thought. He turned to the bartender and said, " Here they come, you're up." The bartender nodded and ran outside, trying to look flustered._

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" Excuse me fine sirs," he shouted to the soldiers. "There's a brawl getting out of control at the pub, I could use some help!"

" Leave it to the drunken Timber scum to always be disturbing the peace," the Galbadian officer replied, and then turning to his men, "weapons at the ready men, arrest them all and kill any who resist."

"Yes sir!", the soldiers saluted and drew their swords. The officer slapped a magazine into his weapon and walked briskly down the staircase, followed closely by his men. He flung open the door and pointed the gun inside.

"All right you worthless rats! Break it up, you're all under- What?!" He cut himself off, noticing the scene inside was completely serene, more peaceful then the average pub, in fact it appeared almost too peaceful. One of the customers slowly raised his hands on top of his head, looking quizzically at the officer, another burst out in laughter. _Very funny, thought the officer._

—

"You," he addressed the bartender sternly. "who do you think you are? You can't just play your little practical jokes on us! Men, arrest him!" As the soldiers moved to detain the bartender, Wedge moved in from behind the officer and put him in a headlock, his sword depressed ever so slightly on the officer's throat.

"Biggs now!" he shouted. No sooner had the soldiers noticed their commander's assailant than did Biggs burst through the back door of the pub, his gun trained on the soldiers. The half dozen other men in the bar pulled out concealed pistols and moved to disarm the soldiers while Wedge "liberated" the officer's gun.

"Up against the wall!" Biggs commanded, gesturing to the east wall with his machine gun. The soldiers rushed to obey, but their officer was less enthusiastic.

"Traitors!" he spat. "You won't get away with this!"

"I wouldn't be so sure about that."

Zone strode out from the bathroom, Watts in tow as usual.

"You see," he continued. "In case you haven't noticed, your country is in turmoil, Deling is dead, Edea's out of the picture, Caraway's got his hands full trying to help Esthar battle those monsters from the Lunar Cry, and who's left to stop us, that politician Rufus? Ha! He'll have no choice but to negotiate with us. So, I'd say we will get away with this. Uh huh, looks like Timber's finally free!" he finished exuberantly.

"Uhh sir, not to belittle the victory, but all we got was a few lousy soldiers." Watts interjected.

"That's better than we've ever done before, and besides, Galbadia isn't exactly the juggernaut it used to be, besides which, it's not like we're just gonna hold these guys hostage, we've got their weapons now and more importantly, their uniforms. So don't be such a sour puss!" Zone snapped. "Contact Rinoa, she should be with Squall at Balamb Garden, I'll bet _she's gonna be happy._"

—

"All right, sorry." Watts skulked away to find a radio. Zone, Biggs and Wedge sat down at a table and began to draft their list of demands from the Galbadian government.

* *

"So, some rebels got a few soldiers and they think they can push the whole country around. What audacity!" Senator Rufus slammed his fist

on the hard wood desk, causing a satisfying reverberation. "Has the whole world lost it's mind?" he turned to his adjutant, "There will be no negotiations! Timber has crossed us for the last time! Mobilize my troops, tell them to burn Timber to the ground!" he finished, practically fuming with rage.

"Sir, uh, if you don't mind my saying so, don't you think that's a bit rash? This could be your big break, I mean, what if you rescued those hostages? You'd be a hero, you'd have the whole of Galbadia in the palm of your hand. If I may say so, you wouldn't even have to ask to become President for Life." his adjutant suggested quietly, but gained confidence as he finished.

"Good idea, but one major flaw."

"Sir?"

"My men are not trained to handle situations like this, and if the hostages got killed, I might as well retire." he explained.

"Your men might not be trained for such operations, but SeeD is. And furthermore, if any of the hostages get killed, you just blame SeeD. Plus, who cares if some SeeD members die, people might get upset if some loyal Galbadian troops die, but SeeDs are just back stabbing mercenaries."

"I must say, I like it. It's just crazy enough to work. Contact SeeD, tell them I'll pay 500,000 gil for every hostage they rescue, plus an extra million for the heads of these terrorists' leaders!"

"Yes sir, immediately sir!" As his assistant left the room, Rufus envisioned himself as the President for Life, and he liked what he saw.

"Poor bastards, heh heh heh..."

* *

"Wake up sleepy head!" Rinoa's lively voice caused Squall to stir momentarily and emit a small moan before drifting back to sleep. Putting her hands on his shoulder, she shoved him gently, and he rolled over onto his back. "Okay, you asked for it, Rip van Winkle." Smiling, she produced a dog biscuit. "Angelo! Here, boy!" Angelo came panting in from the hallway and immediately noticed the treat which Rinoa held. Rinoa held it right under the dog's nose and then tossed it onto Squall's chest. Angelo reacted instantly, propelling himself onto the bed and proceeding to devour the dog biscuit.

"What?" Squall groaned. It was clear he had not slept much last night. He opened his eyes and the first thing he saw was Angelo gaping mouth as the dog munched on the treat.

"Aaaaaaaahhh!" he screamed, rolling accidentally off the side of the bed. As he glared up at Rinoa, realizing what a fool he had made of himself, she could not help but giggle.

"Very funny" he said sarcastically, giving Rinoa a half-hearted glare.

"What," she replied. "did I interrupted your highness' beauty

sleep?"

"How did you get in here again?" he asked. _Oh yeah, I think she was_ in here when I went to sleep. "Never mind."__

—

"I won't."

"Please don't do that again."

"Do what again?" she asked innocently.

"Wake me up with your dog."

"Would you rather I awaken you with a kiss, your highness?"

"Better than a kiss from Angelo, I reckon."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Uhh, nothing." Squall responded quickly, thinking he may have said too much.

"Nothing, eh? Thought so." Rinoa said understandingly.

"Whatever." They said in unison. Even Squall could not suppress a smile this time. By this time Squall was on his feet, and he stood a head taller than Rinoa.

"Come here." he said, pulling Rinoa to him. They embraced momentarily, before they were interrupted by his door as it crashed open.

"Hey what's up!" Irvine boomed. "Xu wants to see you on the bridge so-whoa, my bad!" _ Why does this always happen to me? thought Squall._

—

"Way to go Kinneas, while you're at it, why don't you take a picture too." Zell shouted from behind Irvine. _And there's Zell, too._

—

"Tee-hee, I told you we should've knocked first!" _And that must be..._

—

"Selphie!" said Zell "You seriously need to teach your hotshot sniper cowboy wannabe boyfriend some manners."

"Calm down, Zell." Squall said. "Now what is it you want?" _In other words, he thought,_ why have you seen fit to interrupt me at the crack of dawn when it's obvious that I want to be alone with Rinoa?__

—

_ "Oh yeah," Irvine continued. "Well like I was saying, Xu wants to see you on the bridge to brief you on your next mission."_

—

"Some sort of counter-terrorist operation, I believe." Zell added, trying to sound as official as he could_. _

—

"Tell Xu I'll be with her in 10 minutes, I need some time to get dressed. In the mean time, the rest of you assemble on the bridge. Be prepared to disembark immediately." _Damn, I'm bossing them around again, I hate when I do that._

—

"Yes sir, commander sir!" Zell saluted smartly. Irvine nodded and strolled out the door, Selphie clinging to his arm. Squall went to change when he realized Zell was still standing at attention.

"Dismissed, Zell" _He's really taking this commander bit seriously.

—

—

45 minutes later Squall struggled past Rinoa and ran out of his room. She had forced him to shower and have breakfast before he finally left. "Rinoa," he had said. "I have to get to this mission briefing, timeliness is important in SeeD, you should know that."

"They can wait," she had told him. "after all, you're the commander of SeeD, you call the shots.

"Still, I have a duty to Garden, SeeD isn't me, SeeD is more important than just its leader. SeeD is about ideals, and those ideals are what made me who I am. I want to be faithful to what SeeD stands for. Besides which, you're not my mother, and it's not like we're some old married couple, either."

"Married couple, eh? I like that."

_What a stupid thing to say. Squall kicked himself for saying that. There were more important things to do than argue with Rinoa, and he was afraid that he might have gone too far. _It's not like I hate the idea, I just wish Rinoa would stop thinking about things like that. He paused as he waited for the elevator, and noticed Rinoa running up the staircase after him. The door opened, and he stepped in, Rinoa right on his heels. He pressed the close button, but she jumped in with him.__

—

"Why so hasty, dear?" she asked, scrutinizing him and smiling.

"Well, I'm about half an hour late to an important meet-" Rinoa cut him off by throwing her arms around his neck and kissing him slowly.

Squall's mood softened quickly, and he held her by the waist and pulled her up to him. He gently set her back down on her feet as they continued to kiss. The doors slid open and he pulled away from her and was greeted by the level gazes of Quistis and Xu. Zell rolled his eyes, Irvine gave a quick thumbs up, and Selphie winked, then the three broke out in laughter.

"Attention!" Xu clicked her heels and glared at Zell, Selphie, and Irvine, who immediately put on straight faces. She turned to Squall, "Squall, I won't ask, you being the commander and a hero and whatnot."

"I told you." Rinoa whispered in his ear. Squall sighed audibly.

"Is there something I should know, _Mr. Leonheart?" Quistis demanded sternly. Squall did not reply. _Quistis, you're not my instructor anymore, please.__

—

"Yes, you're probably thinking, 'Quistis, you're not my instructor anymore'. Well, I'm not, but just because I'm no longer you superior, in fact, I'm _your subordinate now, commander, but I think I'm still entitled to an answer."_

—

"Whatever." Quistis shook her head and smiled condescendingly.

"Anyway!" Xu took charge of the conversation at that point. "On with your briefing. Senator Rufus of Galbadia has hired SeeD to alleviate a hostage situation in Timber. A terrorist organization has apparently taken several hostages in a local pub. That was at 1635 hours yesterday. At 1645, the local garrison surrounded the terrorists and sealed off the immediate area. However, these are just GIs, not trained to handle such incidents, and so Rufus made a request for SeeD intervention at 2230 hours. The hostage takers are completely besieged, the power to the building has been cut, and all their transmissions have been jammed. Your orders are to rescue all six hostages and eliminate or capture four key individuals whose identities you will be provided with by the local garrison commander. Capture any other hostile survivors. Additional information will be provided by local forces or your own intelligence. If you leave on the Ragnorak in ten minutes, you should be at the scene in about two hours, 1420 local time. Be prepared for potentially extended operations, and try to avoid collateral casualties. As usual, conduct yourselves in a manner appropriate to your status as SeeDs. Any questions?"

"Yeah," said .Rinoa. "why is SeeD still conducting these mercenary activities? We have defeated Sorceress Ultimecia, that's the true purpose of SeeD right?"

"The true purpose of SeeD," Xu corrected. "is to defeat the_sorceress, whomever she may be. You yourself are not a threat to us, however, we do not yet know who received Adel's powers when she was killed, and consequently we do not know if this individual is friend or foe. And furthermore, when you die, your powers will be passed on as well, and we shall have to deal with your successor as well. So

you see, as long as there are any sorceresses, good or evil, there will be a purpose for SeeD, and since we must maintain the organization, we must continue to dispatch SeeDs as mercenaries." _

—

"That's too bad." Rinoa muttered. Squall, sensing that she had been hurt, slid his arm reassuringly around her. Zell grinned, and Squall glared at him, adding to the already high tension in the room.

"Okay! All aboard the Ragnorak, next stop-Timber!" Selphie was clearly trying to relax the mood, but Squall was glad she was trying.

"Move out!" Zell piped in.

"Good luck." said Xu.

"Sounds like a mission for a sharpshooter, if y'ask me."

"Hey, try not and choke up this time." Zell advised.

Irvine paused for a moment. "Well, if I do say so, it's a good thing I did, would you really have wanted me to end up killing Matron?" he finally responded.

"That's enough!" Squall finally silenced their bickering. "Board the Ragnorak, and I want you guys in separate rooms once we embark." This of course infuriated Zell, who stormed out pouting, and also warranted a dirty look from Irvine as he exited along with Selphie, Xu, and Quistis. Rinoa smiled at Squall.

` "Look Rinoa, I didn't want you coming along on this mission, seeing as how this is just SeeD business and I wouldn't want you to be at risk for no good reason. But, it looks like you're going to come whether I like it or not so..." he began.

"You are most correct, your highness." she interjected as he gathered his thoughts.

"So...just stay close to me and don't get hurt."

"Don't worry, your highness, I'm a big girl, I can take care of myself."

"And please, stop calling me 'your highness'." After a short but uneasy pause, they both burst into laughter and kissed as Squall carried Rinoa to the elevator.

* *

"OKAY!" Zone shouted hoarsely through the megaphone. "WE ARE PREPARED TO NEGOTIATE THE RELEASE OF OUR HOSTAGES, I AM GOING TO SLOWLY OPEN THE FRONT DOOR AND PRESENT OUR DEMANDS!" Zone dragged himself to the door and opened it slightly. This action was greeted by a hail of fire from the surrounding soldiers. He quickly dove back into the safety of the pub, kicking the door shut behind him.

"Dammit!" he yelled out the window. "Don't you stupid sons of bitches know I've got hostages in here. Shit! Don't make me do something you'll regret!" In a moment the window frame too was riddled by bullets.

"WE DO NOT NEGOTIATE WITH TERRORISTS!" came a voice through the speakers set up on top of the besiegers' barricade. "YOU WILL RELEASE THE HOSTAGES AND SURRENDER IMMEDIATELY BY ORDER OF THE GALBADIAN ARMY!"

"They could've overrun us hours ago." Watts said wearily, huddled in a corner, clutching his rifle. "They've gotta be waiting for something. I've got a bad feeling."

"That's just your imagination," Biggs contradicted. "The G-Army would never abandon comrades like that. They're not the nicest people in the world but they do have a sense of camaraderie, eh Wedge?"

"Well," Wedge agreed. "even if they didn't really care, it would be their commander's ass if the hostages were killed. C'mon Watts, stay frosty, nobody said this was gonna be easy. You want to liberate Timber, don't you?" Wedge was trying to give Watts some reassurance, but it was painfully obvious that the man did not belong fighting on the on the proverbial "front line".

"More than anything, but still..." Watts replied weakly. "This just doesn't seem right." he finished.

"Trust me, we have nothing to worry about." Zone said with seemingly feigned confidence.

"Oh yeah, except for the hundred or so itchy-fingered G-soldiers outside who would like nothing better than to come in here and crush the resistance once and for all." Watts mumbled sarcastically.

"You say something, Watts?" Zone asked.

"No, nothing."

"Okay, just thought I heard-" he was cut off by a deafening roar which for a moment seemed to emanate from everywhere at once, and then passed to the northwest."

"What in hell is that?!" Wedge shouted in a state of temporary panic.

Zone, having thrown himself on the ground, crawled slowly towards the window and peered out to see the Ragnorak coming about, beginning a vertical landing

"The Ragandrok!" Zone yipped, jumping for joy. "Squall and Rinoa have finally come back to liberate Timber!"

"Uh, that's the Ragnorak, sir." Watts corrected.

"Same difference! Watts, can't you see how great this is? With SeeD here, especially SeeDs like Squall, no G-Army's gonna mess with us!"

After calming down slightly, Zone looked back into the pub to see Biggs and Wedge cowering under a table. _What's gotten into those two?, he thought. _Oh yeah, Squall, he remembered. "Yo, don't worry, Squall's with us, and since you're with us, too, Squall's with you. Cheer up, man!"__

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"Guess that proves me wrong..." Wedge observed.

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"Okay! We're almost there, everyone. Initiating landing sequence. Engaged!" Selphie said energetically, punching a sequence of buttons.

"I love it when you talk technical." Irvine said, placing a hand on her shoulder.

Selphie turned her head to face him momentarily. "Thanks, tee-hee!" she said, winking before returning her attention to piloting the ship. Irvine smirked, nodding to Squall, who tried to seem as if he hadn't noticed. Zell clenched his fists, growling quietly. Irvine acknowledged him coolly, which added to his frustration.

"all right." Squall announced. "Everyone prepare to disembark. Irvine, make sure you have your sniper rifle." Irvine nodded, gesturing to a case he had left in the corner of the cockpit.

"We'll be touching down about 25 meters from the west gate." Selphie reported. A moment later the Ragnorak ceased all horizontal velocity and began a vertical descent.

"Touch down in five, four, three, two, one..." There was a slight jolt as the ship settled.

"Lowering main ramp." Selphie said. A muffled sound of whirring servos was heard as the gangway was let down slowly. Selphie logged off the pilot program as the rest of the team gathered their gear.

"Move out!" Squall commanded. "We shouldn't be far from the target area." By the time he had finished, everyone had assembled on the lift platform. Quistis clicked her heels and the hydraulics went into action. They began towards the ramp as outside several military helicopters circled the pub area, the familiar sounds of trains and the bustle of the passengers and inhabitants drowned out by the sirens and loudspeakers of the besieging Galbadian forces.

Only minutes later the SeeDs arrived at the scene, whereupon they were greeted by a lieutenant of the local commander.

"Welcome!" the officer shouted above the commotion. Squall nodded in return, indicating that he was the leader of the squad. "Follow me," the lieutenant continued. "I'll brief you on the current situation." A short time later the SeeDs were in mobile command vehicle, standing around a table above which floated a holographic projection of a building layout. Selphie studied that intently, trying to access the controls on the adjoining console.

"Ah yes," the officer said, breaking Selpphie's concentration. "We'll be getting to that in a moment." He gestured with his hand, directing their attention to a screen in the front.

"Since your initial briefing at Garden, there have been a number of developments. First of all, it appears that the terrorists have placed approximately ten of these demolition charges." A picture appeared on the screen of what resembled a large four-pointed star with a receiver and some small clamps attached. "They have stated that if we attempt a breach, they will destroy the building, which would be disastrous to those inside as well as in the immediate vicinity. Therefore, your first priority will be to disarm these charges, otherwise it's all over."

"Hey!" Zell complained. "There's nothing in the contract about that! What gives?" _Please Zell, Squall frowned while at the same time Selphie rolled her eyes and Irvine smiled knowingly._

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"Obviously, sir," the officer replied. "we have contacted Garden and with their cooperation your contract has been modified accordingly."

"Can we see the new con—"

"Anyway," the officer said, cutting Zell off in mid-sentence. " you will need to utilize one of these disarmament devices which you are all being provided with." He handed out six small tools, cylindrical handles with a button for the thumb on one end, and an infra red transmitter on the other. "Touch them to the receiver, press, and hold for three seconds, the jamming signal should deactivate the detonation mechanism. Now, if you will direct your attention to our schematic." He indicated the table with the hologram and the group turned to face it while he filed some commands on the console Selphie had been tampering with earlier.

"Thermal scans indicate that there are eleven armed terrorists in the building, posted at these points." Red figures appeared, indicating hostile forces. The lieutenant pressed another button and six neon green figures appeared, all huddled together in the main room. "These, of course, are the hostages. Rescuing them is your primary objective." Another keystroke caused the heads of four of the terrorists to turn blue. "We believe that their leaders are in the main room, with the hostages. You will need to eliminate or at least apprehend all four of them. Here are their identifies."

On the main screen there appeared suddenly mug and profile shots of Biggs, Wedge, Zone, and Watts with names below their respective pictures. Rinoa gasped, her eyes widening. She grasped Squall's hand tightly, and he held her reassuringly.

"Don't worry." he whispered to her, and then addressed the officer, "That may be a problem, I believe we are still under the employment of two of those men, Zone and Watts. I'll need to consult Garden before any action can be taken."

"Not to worry, we have already spoken to Garden on this matter as well. Besides which, communications in this area are jammed, so I'm

afraid that would be quite impossible." He spoke with confidence, perhaps even overconfidence, Squall observed.

"I'm sorry," Squall stated. "but I would need confirmation from Garden itself." Rinoa beamed at his steadfast refusal. The Galbadian lieutenant did not share her enthusiasm.

"Please," he said, sounding somewhat exasperated. "communication is jammed, you can't contact them at all. Just do your job, these terrorists aren't going to wait forever. I promise, you'll get word from Garden as soon as possible." Quistis, it seemed, had heard enough.

"Look," she had taken on her trademark commanding tone. "Those two in there are our friends, and I for one will not take part in this, especially without speaking to Garden beforehand."

"The purpose of SeeD does not involve questioning a mission!" the officer bellowed at her.

"Who are you to judge the true purpose of SeeD?!" she demanded.

"Yeah!" Rinoa agreed. Hearing the commotion, a pair of guards rushed in from the forward compartment, hands at their hips, fingering their swords. IN response to what appeared a new threat, Zell assumed a combat stance, clenching his Ehrgeiz into fists. Squall felt that the escalating hostilities had reached a dangerously high level and made an attempt to calm the situation.

"That's enough!" he said firmly. "Lieutenant, me and my team will return to the Ragnorak and attempt to contact Garden from outside the jamming zone, depending on Garden's instructions, we may return to complete our mission." At this the SeeD squad adjourned from the table and proceeded towards the door from which they had entered.

"How can you do this?!" the Galbadian shouted. "Those hostages are in danger, you can't just walk out...Guards, stop them! Don't let 'em get away!" As the guards moved to intercept him, Zell laughed.

"You can't be serious, do you know we are? We defeated Ultimecia, we blew up your missile base, we busted out of your prison. We'd eat your guards for breakfast. Jeez, I'll bet your entire garrison would hardly qualify as a warm up for Squall!" In response to his boasts, the two soldiers flourished their swords menacingly at him. Zell did not appear to be concerned.

"All right," Squall said, more firmly. "let's get back to the Ragnorak, now. And that's an order!" They departed single file, Squall in the front and Zell trailing behind. When all had exited save Zell, the infuriated guards stepped together to bar his way.

For a moment, they stood staring at each other, practically toe to toe, saying nothing. It was Squall, from outside, who broke the silence.

"Zell, let's go!" he shouted.

"Go on ahead, I'll catch up." he replied.

"I'll trust you this time."

"Thanks, man" Squall then looked to his left, noticed he now stood alone, and ran to catch up with the rest of the group. Zell returned his attention to the soldiers he had been shouting past.

"Yo, I'd love to stay and play, but I've got pressing engagements, so adios." he said with a condescending smile. One of the soldiers cracked an evil smile in return.

"You're not going anywhere, filthy mercenary." he spat. As they made eye contact again, the other guard delivered a blow to the gut with the hilt of his sword. Zell grunted, hunching over and clutching his stomach. The guards laughed as the other raised his sword and brought it down for a killing blow, but their gaiety was cut short when Zell caught the blade in his adamantite glove and wrenched it from the guard's hand. He dropped the sword on the floor and uppercut it's owner, the heavy metal studs easily breaking the jaw. The other guard swung for Zell's head, but he ducked the clumsy attack and countered with a nose shattering roundhouse kick. With both enemies temporarily out of action, he dashed out the door of the command center and sprinted for the safety of the western gate. As he fled through a maze of sandbags and other portable barriers, the somewhat dazed and obviously infuriated lieutenant hastily activated the PA system. Snatching the microphone in one hand, he pounded the TALK button.

"Attention all units!" his voice boomed from the loudspeakers. "Stop the escaping SeeD! You have clearance to open fire. Repeat..." with that he dropped the microphone, allowing it to fall to the floor, and with his violent motions betraying his agitation, seized an automatic rifle from a rack on the wall. He stumbled out of the door, unbalanced as he loaded the weapon with both hands. The SeeD was rather a distance from him by this point, but many of his men were in close pursuit. Hastily he drew a bead on his target, and leveling the gun at his shoulder, snapped off a few shots before running ahead with the rest of his men.

Zell ducked his head as the bullets whined past him. _Damn, didn't mean to cause so much commotion. Squall's not gonna like this. Taking cover behind a row of sandbags, he peered out towards the exit to see a score or so of sword armed guards approaching his position. _No escape from there, he thought. Glancing behind him revealed more of the same. _Or to the east. ____

"There he is!" one of the guards hollered, pointing towards him. The troopers continued their advance towards him, forming a semicircle to envelop him, and the officers trained their guns on him, opening fire.

"Shit!" He dove to the ground, scraping his arms badly on the cement as the enemy fire thudded into the sandbags, causing clouds of fine dust to fill the air. Coughing, he realized they had him pinned. _Still, if I stay here I'm as good as dead anyway. Deciding to brave the odds, he pulled himself up to a crouching position. The soldiers were closing in, probably no more than ten feet away, but Zell waited

until the last possible moment. As the first of the swordsmen began to scale over the barrier protecting him from the officers' gunfire, Zell launched himself towards the pub, running with his upper body bent over, almost parallel to the ground._

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"Got him, fire!" the Galbadian lieutenant shouted to his subordinate officers as he took aim at the SeeD, whom had finally broken his cover. He tracked the SeeD with the muzzle of his weapon, but was unable to fire due his own soldiers being so tightly packed in that area. _Wait a minute, it occurred to the lieutenant. _He's headed towards the pub, what the hell?! __

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"Alright," he addressed the other officers again._ "open fire once he reaches the clearing by the pub. Suicidal bastard..." he trailed off with a small smile._

—

Zell saw the path ahead of him open up as he reached the barbed wire, which separated the base from a twenty-foot no-man's land surrounding the pub. Crossing his fingers, he propelled himself over the fence, and, having already drawn himself up to full height rushed with all his might towards the pub. As soon as he had cleared the fence, he came under a hail of fire from the enemy officers. He staggered as a shot slammed into his side, plowing itself approximately two inches into his body. With no time to recover, he leapt through a cracked window, shattering the glass and rolling over his head as he hit the floor inside the main room. He was immediately greeted by the rough click-clack of guns being readied. He opened his eyes to see a pair of flushed, sweating militants pointing their pistols down at him. He felt mildly disappointed, but he was far too faint and exhausted to truly care.

"Well, so nice that one of you could join us." said an oddly familiar voice. Zone strolled smugly over to where he lay. He looked down, and his smirk was replaced by an expression of pure bewilderment.

"You?!" Zone said, dumbfounded. It was then Zell allowed himself the luxury of blacking out.

* *

Squall walked briskly up the gangway of the Ragnorak, followed by Quistis, Rinoa, and Irvine. Selphie was trailing behind, stopping sporadically and looking back, hoping to catch a glimpse of Zell as he ran to rejoin the rest of the SeeDs. _He'll get here soon, she told herself, and with a measure of disappointment, began to ascend the ramp. Near the top of the ramp she stopped abruptly, as if transfixed by some unseen force._

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"Is something wrong, Sefie?" Irvine asked.

"Did you hear that?" she said. Straining his ears, he picked up the

sound of some distant gunfire. Almost instantly he recognized the firing rhythm of burst fire machine guns. _Galbadian standard issue, he observed, recalling his training at that Garden._

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"Sounds like Zell's in pretty serious trouble, either that or the standoff's heating up." he speculated.

"We gotta go back and help him out!" Selphie exclaimed, bouncing up and down anxiously. Irvine nodded in agreement

"Zell can take care of himself ." Squall said coldly. "We need to contact Garden first."

"But what if Zone and Watts are the ones on trouble?!" Rinoa demanded, clearly discontent with Squall's decision. "They're not SeeDs, who knows what kind of trouble they might've gotten themselves into." She tugged fiercely on his arm, trying to drag him down the gangway. Squall frowned, appearing only mildly annoyed with Rinoa's immature behavior but holding his ground.

"Look Squall," Quistis advised. _The voice of reason as usual, he thought, shaking his head at the floor. "normally I would agree with you, contacting Garden is proper procedure, but Zell is our friend, so just this once?" she pleaded._

—

"Yeah Squall, don't be such a tight ass!" Rinoa said quickly. Squall narrowed his eyes, scrutinizing her with a glare. Rinoa smiled awkwardly, thinking she may have said too much. After a moment of uncomfortable silence, she smiled sweetly at him.

"Pleeeeeease?" she said childishly, but, seductively, irresistibly. Squall rolled his eyes, and, in mute testimony to his surrender, started back down the ramp.

"Thanks Squall!" Rinoa said happily, hugging him tightly. She released the embrace, noticing that Selphie, Irvine, and Quistis had already departed en route to the source of the gunfire. As she turned in pursuit of the others, Squall caught her gently by the wrist.

"Yes?" she inquired with some surprise.

"Rinoa, I don't want you coming with us, it's too—"

"Hush Squall." she said sternly, putting a finger to his lips. "You know I'm coming whether you like it or not. I'll be fine as long as you're with me."

"Rinoa, you said yourself that Zone and Watts could get themselves into trouble because they're not SeeDs, and remember, neither are you. You haven't been through the training—" Rinoa cut him off again, this time physically muffling him with her hand.

"Yes, but they don't have someone like you watching over them either. Jeez, you sound like Caraway. Anyway, let's get going, I'll wager that the others are already there." She turned once again and ran

energetically down the street. _What's wrong with Caraway? Squall thought as he started after her._

—

* *

"Damn!" the Galbadian lieutenant yelled hoarsely as Zell crashed through the pub window. "Frickin' brat got away! That little twerp..." he mumbled, scuffing his boots on the coarse, dusty ground.

"I hit 'im once, barely slowed 'im down." a sergeant muttered, shaking his head remorsefully.

"The hell does Garden do to those kids?" another moaned.

"Uhh, Lt. Claudius, sir?" a soldier said, approaching the assistant commander cautiously, wary of his fowl temperament.

"Yes private?"

"Sir, the two scouts you sent after the SeeDs have reported in."

"And?" Claudius prompted, smiling slightly.

"The SeeDs are approaching base, but as far as the scouts could ascertain, they made no attempt to contact Garden." the private explained.

"So, they came back to help their buddy. Good, very good, carry on." The trooper saluted, then exited.

"Okay men," Claudius said to his officers. "get with your squads, tell them to prepare for a surprise attack. We'll allow them into our base, then jump them. SO, act casual, but be ready to attack, got it?" The officers responded with a chorus of "Yes, sir!"s, and dispersed to their squads. _We've got those little punks this time. He laughed harshly, kicking a nearby helmet, his toe smashing into the steel. _

—

"Owwwwwww!"

* *

Selphie, Quistis, Irvine, Rinoa, and finally Squall turned the corner, bringing the Galbadian base once again into view. As they approached the entrance, it seemed that the entire garrison was watching them, and yet none said so much as a word. Irvine ran his right hand uneasily through his hair, left gripping the Exeter resting at his side. Quistis reached for her Save the Queen, but only left a hand on it, while otherwise maintaining her composure. Selphie raised an eyebrow, her eyes darting back and forth, expecting to catch a glimpse of some monster lurking in a hole. Squall's piercing blue eyes were focused straightforward as he silently contemplated the situation, his permanent deadpan frown revealing nothing.

"Back so soon? Well, what's the word from Garden?" Lt. Claudius appeared from inside a makeshift bunker, greeting them with unexpected cordiality.

"Where is our friend?" Squall asked in a low, menacing tone.

"Friend? Oh, the other SeeD? Last I saw he was headed towards the west gate, where your airship landed. I would have thought-

"Don't bullshit us!" Irvine snapped, bringing his gun up to the hip. Recoiling several feet, the lieutenant took a deep breath and responded.

"We _heard the gunfire." Rinoa added. Squall turned to Quistis._

—

"I want you to take Rinoa and Selphie to go back to the Ragnorak," he whispered. "wait there, if we're not back in half an hour, or things really heat up, make an airstrike. Selphie can handle that."

"I'll go this time Squall, as long as you're not just trying to get me out of your way." Rinoa whispered in response. "Squall, be careful." The three women started back to the Ragnorak again.

"Just you and me, man." Irvine said quietly.

"Where're your ladyfriends goin'?" Claudius asked.

"They're going to look for our missing comrade." Squall answered calmly.

"Right..." he said sarcastically, dismissing the topic of conversation. "Anyway, what did Garden tell you?"

"Actually, we were unable to" Squall began matter-of-factly. "contact them so-

"Here, why don't you tell me all about it over coffee." Irvine eyed him suspiciously.

"Well, I'd love to," he said. "but we should probably-" Claudius interrupted his hastily composed excuse.

"You'll need to wait here for your ladyfriends anyway. Please," he said invitingly, and with his face radiating an intangible aura of danger he finished, "I insist." Squall agreed, nodding for Irvine to follow him. As they walked to the bunker, Squall and Irvine inconspicuously lagged behind their host.

"Look man, I dunno about this, somethin' ain't right." Irvine whispered, looking around cautiously to be sure no one was watching.

"Just play along. I have an idea." Squall responded.

"Yeah, would you care to enlighten me?"

"Look around." Squall said, directing him to several elevated points. "See those surveillance devices? They probably recorded whatever happened to Zell. So, we need to find a hard copy of those recordings, and the cameras all seem to be wired centrally to that bunker. Understand?"

"Yeah, pretty much." Irvine said, seeming bewildered. Squall sighed and shook his head.

"What?" Irvine asked, truly confused. Squall rolled his eyes.

"Be ready to fight." he instructed.

"Of course. Here, you can take this, I brought an extra." Irvine produced a silenced pistol, holding it out to Squall. _What? I haven't used a sidearm since training, I never carry one._

—

"Why?" Squall asked, bemused. Irvine looked at him with an expression of surprise playing across his face.

"Duh!" he exclaimed. "We're like spies, covert operatives. Subtlety, stealth, and silence are key. You know, infiltration, sabotage, subterfuge, seducing beautiful women. Sorry, had to throw that one in. Anyway, my point is that with Lionheart and Exeter, we'd be about as subtle as Bahamut with a bottle of 30 proof. "

"Okay." Squall conceded. _Been drinking Selphie's sugar coffee again?

—

—

"Ah, gentlemen, this way!" Lt. Claudius shouted, behaving in an increasingly suspicious manner. Obliging him, Squall and Irvine jogged the remaining distance to the bunker where Claudius waited, holding open the heavy steel door. They entered into the dark room, Irvine ducking through the entrance.

As Irvine and Squall settled into their chairs, Claudius strode through the door, followed by half a dozen other officers, who all took seats at and around the table in such a way that there was no direct path to the exit, and Claudius was furthest from them.

"So," he started, resting his elbows on the table and leaning across, "let's talk."

* *

Zell blinked and opened his eyes, squinting from the sudden flood of light. He examined a strangely familiar ceiling for a moment and being unable to recall its exact whereabouts, closed his eyes again. No sooner had he begun to drift back into unconsciousness that he felt it. A deep, piercing pain emanating from his left side. Reaching his right hand across his body to the wound, he uttered a virtually inaudible incantation.

"Curaga." He winced at the burning sensation caused by the flesh sealing shut, but more so as muscles rewound tightly around the bullet lodged in his lower ribs. _Damn, I'm gonna need surgery for

that now, I can't believe I let 'em hit me! _

—

"Oh, you're up at last, I see." came the familiar voice again. Zone walked over, kneeling by him. _Zone, now I remember._

—

"Could you tell me where I am? I seem to have forgotten." Zell responded groggily, sitting up and rubbing a tender spot on the back of his head.

"You're in the Timber Pub, surrounded by marauding Galbadians, that ring any bells?" _Now I remember, strange that I forgot, yet I knew I'd been shot. Hmm, must've been the GF._

—

If I may be so bold, fated one, it would appear that the blame lies not with me, but with thine head wound. a voice reverberated through his mind.

"Shut up, Bahamut." Zell muttered.

As thou wish.

"What? You say some something?" Zone asked.

"Huh? Oh, no. I was just talkin' to Bahamut." Zell answered casually.

"Rightâ€|" Zone said sarcastically. "anyway, would you mind letting us know what's been goin' on out there?"

"Oh sure." Zell explained the situation. By the time he had finished, all of the rebels not on watch had crowded around him to hear the story.

"â€|and that about brings up to now, I think. How long was I out, anyway?" he finished, wiping his sweating brow with the back of his glove.

"Actually, sir, you were only unconscious for about twenty minutes." Watts stated.

"Wait a minute," said Zone. "if they're not gonna go after us, what're the rest of the SeedS doing?"

"I don't really know. Seed is supposed to be neutral, which would mean carrying out our current mission, except that we technically still have a contract with the Forest Owls. Squall was gonna contact Garden, but from what I gather the Ragnorak hasn't taken off yet, so who knows?" Zell shrugged.

"Well, when you didn't get back to the Ragandrook," Zone speculated. Watts attempted to correct his mispronunciation, but Zone continued speaking. "and they heard all the shooting, they probably figured you were in trouble. So they might've come back to rescue you, although things've been pretty peaceful out there."

"Hey, you could be right." Zell said, feeling enlightened. "And just 'cause there hasn't been any commotion doesn't really mean anything. SeedS are trained infiltrators, and we're the best Seed has to offer."

"That is true." Zone agreed.

There is validity to thy boasting, fated one.

"Gee Bahamut, thanks, I think."

Thou art most welcome.

Zell noticed that Zone was looking at him strangely, contemplating.

"What?"

"Oh nothing." Zone said condescendingly.

"Geez, I was just talkin' to Bahamut, what's your problem?" Zell said, slightly perturbed. "Oh, of course. You probably didn't know, but you can talk to some of the more intelligent GFs. Bahamut happens to communicate telepathically."

"If you say so."

"No, really!"

"Okay, I believe you, now let's get back on the subject." Zone said earnestly, without the patronizing tone. Zell nodded in agreement.

"Alright, now listen, you're with us right?"

"All the way!" he shouted enthusiastically.

"Good, now here's the plan. As things stand now, Galbadia can't very well take the offensive against us without losing the hostages and probably some more of their own, but we don't have the supplies for a long siege like this is looking to be. So we've gotta seize the initiative!"

"Sounds like a plan."

"Well, there's more to it than that. See, in a straight up firefight, we don't stand a chance. That's where the disguises come in, we'll just use the hostage's uniforms! Get it?"

"Good idea. But who's gonna actually sally out? You don't have quite enough uniforms." Zone responded readily.

"I was thinkin' Biggs, Wedge, three of our other guys, and you, since you seem to be pretty much in fighting condition. Plus, we'll put Biggs and Wedge's uniforms on two of the hostages to confuse them if they attempt to break in, even when they know we've planted demo charges. Watts and I would go, but they might get suspicious since we're pretty much the brains of this operation, and I've got horrible stomach cramps. Ow Ow Ow Owwwww!"

"Yeah, I'm pretty much fine for now. I'm gonna need surgery," he said, gesturing his wound. "but that can wait. Anyway, just one question, how are you gonna get this plan rolling?"

"Elementary, my dear Zell," Zone said, smiling intelligently. "we simply agree to release the 'hostages' and send you guys out instead."

"Great, looks like we've got it worked out." Zell smiled, rubbing his hands in anticipation.

"Well, not reallyâ€¦" Watts began. Zone glared menacingly at him, placing a finger on his own lips. "Yeah, everything's fine." he said weakly. As the others prepared to fight, Zone looked forlornly out the window, and crossed his fingers. He considered the stars, an unfazed backdrop to the chaotic scene below. Abruptly a pillar of light, which burst forth from the base, shattered his solace. In a primal state of hysteria, he dove to the floor, curling himself into a tight ball. Zell ran to the window and, arm across his brow, peered out at the tower colored light. _Squall._

—

_ "Son of a bitch!" he grinned._

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Oak Trees and Angel Wings

-Part 2-

Lieutenant Claudius sipped his rapidly cooling coffee, gazing out through the armored view slit of the bunker and into the distant. Many of the stars were plainly visible in the early evening sky. Opposite the table from him, the SeeD who fancied himself a cowboy sat laid back on his chair, feet on the table. Beside him, the SeeD leader stood up, resting a hand on the back of his chair and sipping his coffee occasionally. _Just a few more minutes, he signaled secretly to his men._

—

"Gosh, it sure got dark quickly." he said casually, stretching in his seat, feigning fatigue.

"Yeah, but I don't mind. I kinda like it." Irvine replied.

"A real night crawler, eh?"

"That's what the ladies always tell me." he smiled mischievously. The two laughed uneasily, betraying the tension that pervaded the otherwise relaxed mood.

Squall took no notice as his cold aquamarine eyes searched the room. _The terminal should be in plain sight he frowned, having a taste of bitter, lukewarm coffee. Irvine was being very amicable with the Galbadians, conversing nonchalantly. _Stay on task, Kinneas.__

—

"Hey Squall, have a seat my man." Irvine invited. Squall ignored him, continuing to probe for the terminal.

"Yeah, what's your hurry?" Claudius agreed. Squall was again oblivious.

"C'mon man, sit down! You're makin' everyone nervous." Irvine repeated, stretching. Reluctantly Squall seated himself. He turned to Irvine.

"Kinneas," he whispered. "Don't forget why we're here, we just need to find the security terminal."

"Hey man," Irvine replied. "You told me to act casual, whaddya think I'm doin'? Besides, I am looking. Nothin' here, seems, maybe we got the wrong bunker." Squall shook his head; _The Ragnorak should arrive in thirteen more minutes._ He again addressed Irvine.

"Evacuate in six minutes, terminal or none."

"I have a better idea." _Yeah right._ As he further considered Irvine's words, Squall's expression went from mildly exasperated to apprehensive. _No, he wouldn't_, he reassured himself. As if on cue Irvine turned to Claudius and his men, sitting up to a point where he was virtually standing.

Squall whispered fiercely, "Kinneas, don't do anything stupid!" Irvine simply smiled. _Oh no. _

"Hey Cletus, ya know what you should do?" Irvine tossed his hair back and crossed his arms, concealing his hands in his coat.

"What's that?" Claudius asked, humoring him. _On my mark_, he signaled. _3&2€|1_

"Reach for the skies!" Irvine shouted, flourishing a pair of Seed pistols from inside the folds of his coat.

Reacting instantaneously, Claudius and his men raised their weapons, already prepared to fire. Irvine, being slightly quicker, snapped off two shots before dropping to the ground. The bullets slammed into a sergeant, taking him in the chest. The unfortunate soldier hit the ground with a dull thud.

Squall ducked under the cover of the heavy table, drawing his barely opaque aquamarine gunblade. To his left, Irvine had discarded his

pistols in favor of the gargantuan Exeter. As he loaded the rifle, Squall rose to his feet and set upon a guard as he primed a small grenade, eviscerating him with one blow, not noticing the armed grenade that rolled from his limp hand. As Squall sought his next opponent, an explosion erupted from behind him, the concussion throwing him into the opposite wall.

_ _He placed a hand on the back of his head, wincing slightly, before his pained expression was replaced by a fiery glare and a growl. Gripping the Lionheart tightly in his bloody hands, he raised it high above his head

"Blasting Zone!" he howled. A beam of fluxuating energy, which emanated from the blade and thrust itself skyward into the night, answered his cry. Squall brought down the beam, and with a blinding incandescent flash the remaining soldiers were vaporized where they stood. Nothing remained save their helmets and breastplates, many of which had been reduced to unrecognizable piles of slag by the moment of superheating.

Squall blinked slightly, examining the rubble and realizing his mistake. _Damn, now we'll never find that terminal, I hate when I do this!_ Irvine drew himself to his feet, dusting off his coat and hat.

"Well, that'll make the search go quicker. Oh yeahâ€¦" he said sarcastically.

"We were under attack, Kinneas. Besides, all you did was hide under the table." Squall retorted.

"Hello, I was looking for my ammo, can't shoot without it!" Squall ignored his comrade's gab, taking note instead of large group of enemy soldiers approaching them.

"Anyway, let's get back to Rin-, to the Ragnorak before our half hour is up." He checked his watch. "We have five minutes so move."

"Wait a minute, man. What about Zell? We can't just leave 'im hell knows where."

"He's a SeeD, he'll be fine."

"Wait, I'm sure Selphie wouldn't- Oh yeah, Rinoa! You must be worried about Rinoa, can't say I blame you-"

"I guess I'll come back for you then." Squall cut in sternly, then turned his back and ran for the west gate, taking out several enemy troopers while as he went, barely breaking his stride while he engaged them. Irvine rubbed the back of his neck, puzzled. A moment later a realization dawned on him.

"Oh _I _get it!" he exclaimed triumphantly. "Squall!" he shouted. "I figured it out, I get it!" he exclaimed triumphantly. "Squall!" he shouted. "I figured it out, can come back now! Squall?" In a moment it dawned on him that Squall, characteristically, was not joking.

He raised the Exeter grimly, slapping a cartridge into the barrel. The G-Soldiers were ringing in around him, swords gleaming dimly in

the pale moonlight. Then he figured it out. Laughing maniacally, he fixed his rabid gaze on one of the soldiers, who ignored him and continued his advance. He frowned.

"What? Don't you get it?" he boomed. He was once again ignored; causing him to take on a somewhat concerned expression. "Guess not, well basically the idea is that like Squall makes it look like he's gonna a jet, and then-"

"Shut up, SeeD!" the soldier's leader spat. Irvine sighed and shook his head, looking defeated.

"Well, I guess some people just don't have a sense of humor." He said remorsefully. "Oh _well_, maybe a showdown would be more to your likin'. Alright then, let's go. Come on, do your worst, don't be shy now. Hehehe, no sweat!" Irvine tipped his hat down and clicked off the safety of his rifle as his assailants held their blades in high deportments meant for a quick kill. _Should be close_, Irvine decided, gritting his teeth and applying a minute amount of pressure to the trigger. He squeezed it firmly and at that moment the Galbadians began their charge. He sighted the leader as his Pulse cartridge whined to life, increasing in pitch until it became virtually inaudible. The intense ray bore with ease through the soldier's breastplate, knocking him on his back, the downed trooper's head rolled limply to one side. He downed another, but they were virtually upon him now.

Squall slowed to a brisk walk as he listened to the gunfire and other clamor behind him, he looked over his shoulder and groaned, exasperated by Irvine's stubbornness. _It's a good thing he's a student of Galbadia Garden, that way he's not my responsibility._ For a moment he considered going back, but his SeeD training prevailed. _The order to withdraw takes priority_, he recalled from his training and the inaugural mission at Dollet, more than a year ago. He hurried on his way, his flight further promoted by the score or so of swordsmen whom had been assigned to pursue him. In a short time he rounded a familiar bend to come in sight of the Ragnorak.

* *

"Oneâ€|twoâ€|threeâ€| go on, eat the yummy Kupo nut, good Mog. All right, one more. Mmmmm! Tasty aren't they? Okay now, fly! Come on, don't be afraid, little guy! No, no more Kupo nuts or you'll get too fat. No, bad Mog!" Selphie scolded, focused so intently on the game that she did not notice herself stooped over the console or that her tongue was sticking out the side of her mouth. She pounded a button furiously, and after a moment sighed in defeat and frustration. "Fine, but only if you promise to fly after this. Got it? This _is_ it_. There you go, now fly!"

She mashed the button several more times, and Mog finally ascended the oversized mushroom. He flexed his diminutive wings, and then leapt with all his might, only to fall flat on his face. At that point, a tall, muscular Mog swaggered onto the screen, and Mag immediately ran to him.

"_Who's that guy?_" the buff Mog asked nonchalantly. Mag smiled and shook her head.

_ _"Just some scrub, doesn't even know how to fly._" She replied.

The two walked away together, laughing cruelly.

Selphie quickly switched the game off and jumped to her feet, stomping and shaking her head angrily.

"Aaaaaahhhhh!" she shrieked. A moment later, Rinoa and Quistis ran into the briefing room, looking concerned.

"What's the matter?" Rinoa said, slightly out of breath.

"Oooh, I _hate_ Mog House 2.0! The Mogs used to be so nice and cute, how come they made them all so mean?!" Selphie hollered in response. Quistis bit her lip, annoyed by Selphie's inclement behavior.

"Selphie," she ordered. "_calm down_. Stop throwing a tantrum." Selphie obeyed.

"Sorry," She responded sheepishly. "It's just that, like, Mog House used to be so happy and nice, but then _the_ _company_ decided it would sell better if they made it mean. Thoseâ€|those, meanies!" She stammered.

"I know exactly what you mean." Rinoa sympathized. "It's amazing what some people will do for the almighty Gil."

"Like you ever had to worry about money." Selphie muttered. Rinoa frowned.

"Hey! At least I'm not a mercenary." she retorted. Selphie gasped with indignation.

"Take that back." she demanded quietly.

"You first."

"No way! You are _so_ rich!"

"Maybe, but at least money isn't everything to me."

"Money isn't everything to me!"

"Then why are you a mercenary?"

"Why is your boyfriend a mercenary?"

"Why you-" Rinoa lunged for Selphie, but Quistis blocked her, planting herself firmly between the two.

"Stop it you two!" she yelled harshly. "Did you forget about Squall and Irvine?! We saw Blasting Zone, they could be in serious trouble, and you're sitting here cat fighting! Rinoa, apologize."

"Sorry, Selphie." Rinoa said guiltily. "SeeDs aren't just mercenaries."

"That's okay." Selphie acknowledged. "I'm sorry too. Gosh, I can't believe I just went ballistic like that. But we're still friends right?" she finished hopefully.

"Sure." Rinoa affirmed, and turned to Quistis with a worried expression. "Squall's okay, right? Blasting Zone means that he's faring well, so he should be here any minute." Quistis looked seriously at the younger woman.

"I have complete confidence in Squall's abilities," she said, carefully avoiding the actual question at hand. "if anyone could prevail against such odds, it's him." She added.

"C'mon Rinoa, take your own advice, don't worry!" Selphie piped in, her characteristic enthusiasm restored.

A moment later, gunfire once again broke out, the tat-tat-tat of light machine guns replaced by slower, resounding booms. Straining her hearing, Selphie also picked up a faint ringing sound, akin to that of metal striking metal.

"Sounds like things are heating up again." Quistis observed. As the gunfire continued, Squall appeared from around the corner and started towards the Ragnorak, followed shortly by what seemed to be a small platoon of Galbadian soldiers.

"Squall!" Selphie yipped joyfully. Suddenly she frowned, "But where's Irvine? Why's he still back at the base?"

"We'll worry about that later, lower the gangway!" Quistis ordered.

Selphie, seeing no alternative course of action, complied ruefully, cautioning, "Those soldiers could be trouble, so I'll power up the engines."

"Got it." Rinoa and Quistis replied absently, more intent on readying their weapons and descending to the main deck.

* *

As Squall reached the Ragnorak, it let out a loud hissing and two jets of compressed air as the hydraulic lift began to lower the ramp. He caught sight of Rinoa and Quistis inside the hovering vessel, calling for him. Squall acknowledged their shouts and in doing so caused them to cease. As he set foot on the ramp, the Ragnorak's rocket engines roared and the craft bucked abruptly, throwing him off and onto his back, in the midst of the marauding Galbadians. Reacting instantly, Quistis dove to the edge of the ramp and threw down her Save the Queen as Squall pulled himself to his feet, weakly fending off the soldiers' blows. Nodding to her, he took hold of the long cord in his left hand while simultaneously defending himself with the gunblade in his right.

"Go!" Quistis shouted above the clamor. After a momentary delay, the ship began to ascend vertically and soon Squall was dangling above the roofs of Timber. Rinoa joined Quistis and grabbed on to the end of the whip. Together, the two began to hoist up their leader. Meanwhile, Squall holstered his gunblade and gripped the whip in both hands.

With a final heave, Rinoa and Quistis hauled Squall to safety over the edge of the gangway. Squall drew himself up and proceeded to the cockpit while Quistis hit a switch and the ramp began to retract.

In the cockpit, Selphie turned her seat around and greeted him, "Hey Squall! Good to have you back safe. We're just going to go pick up Irvine now and-". Squall lifted his black-gloved hand for silence.

"No, set course for Garden."

Author's Note: I hate writing highly unprofessional author's notes, but I think I need to apologize for the lack of significant events in and overall brevity of this part. But believe me, something "big" is coming. Trust me, or don't, it makes no differenceâ€|Haâ€|Hahaâ€|MWAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA, BWAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA, GWAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! â€"wheeze-

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Oak Trees and Angel Wings

-Part 3-

"_Garden!?" Selphie exclaimed. "No way! We've gotta go save Irvine first!" The Ragnorak shot over the location of the siege and banked around, decelerating for the next pass, Selphie oblivious to all but the ship's intricate control systems. Squall attempted again to intervene, but Selphie remained focused on the controls. At the portside console Quistis activated the ship's main weapons._

—

"Selphie!" Squall said forcefully, almost hollering. "I'm _ordering you, return to Balamb Garden immediately!"_

—

"One more pass!" She pleaded hastily, unable to divert her attention from the controls for any amount of time. Squall groaned, shaking his head.

"I should discipline you for that." He muttered. The Ragnorak came over the clearing at the center of town, and at the relatively low velocity, Squall was able to pick out Irvine in the fray, besieged on the roof of the G-Army command vehicle. He would fire several shots into the mob surrounding him, and then attempt to fend off the troopers that invariably began to swarm up to the roof with him. _He won't hold out much longer, Squall observed._

—

This time, the Ragnorak, did a tight circle turn right at the edge of Timber Square, almost in a stationary hover. Selphie pressed a small green button.

"This should drop the ladder, I'm sure Irvine'll know what to do from there." She explained. "Oh, but you might want to head to the Air Room in case the winch is manual or he's injured." Quistis finished configuring the weapons, then rose slowly and walked to the lift where she and Rinoa awaited Squall, who was frowning with mild indignation. Selphie felt his steely gaze on her.

"What?" she asked. Squall continued to stare, his lips moving slowly.

"You had a ladder," he pronounced in a low, droning, perturbed tone. "but I had to hold on to a whip." He held up his black gloves in such a way that it was clear that the palms had been cut severely. "You ruined my favorite gloves." He accused.

"Hey chill! I can't even tell you whether or not the winch is manual!" Selphie retorted, "I'm sure the commander of SeeD can get another pair of gloves. Sheesh, besides which, since when did you become such a vanity queen?" Squall's eyes narrowed at her momentarily, and then he whipped around quickly and descended the lift.

* *

Irvine tossed back his sweat soaked hair, his hat falling from his head. The Exeter blazed away into the small army surrounding him, his boot fell upon the hand of a G-Soldier who had been trying to grope his way to his elevated position. One final shot took a trooper in the stomach, throwing him back into his comrades, and the rifle clicked empty. He ejected the clip of Fast Ammunition and with his right hand began to fumble through his coat for the last of his ammunition. Holding up his left hand, he cast Firaga, which kept the marauders at bay.

At last he produced another cartridge, marked _Demolition Ammo and loaded it quickly into the Exeter. He shouldered his weapon and clicked he safety. As he did, he abruptly became aware of a tipping, almost falling sensation. He looked to the crowd at the base of the command vehicle, and the source of the sensation was made obvious. _They're overturning the truck, he realized. The Galbadians heaved, and Irvine scuttled up to the top of the vehicle, which was now nearly the corner. Again they pushed, and the doomed vehicle was forced over its center of gravity ever so slightly, and it tipped slowly, accelerating as it did.__

—

_Now or never, Irvine realized. Clutching Exeter close to his chest, he crouched over like a sprinter. He took a deep breath, _one€two€THREE!, the truck began to creak and shudder, and, closing his eyes, he launched himself into the air. He hit the cobbled ground and rolled, winded but unhurt. Not far behind him the truck smashed noisily against the pavement, heaving broken glass and dust into the night sky. As he recovered his breath, it occurred to him that the enemy soldiers were now opposite the truck, and could not see him.__

—

The Ragnorak came around again, this time very slowly, and a ladder trailing behind it, fluttering in the wind. _This is my chance, he told himself, and, Exeter at his hip, he fired the canister of Demolition Ammo into the truck, producing the desired effect. The vehicle exploded in flames, then began to burn slowly out. On the other side of the charred, smoldering hulk, Irvine could hear the unfortunate Galbadian soldiers' clamoring as they attempted to vacate the proximity of the burning truck. _

—

A moment later, he heard a whining and felt his hair long being blown in his face. Looking up, he saw the Ragnorak directly overhead. Several feet to his right, a rope ladder swung back and forth, slowing eventually to a near total halt. He slung his rifle over his shoulder and cautiously began to ascend. While he climbed, the Ragnorak began a slow vertical climb, carrying the end of the ladder several meters above the ground. He braced himself, then continued his climb, now moving very ponderously, gripping every step tightly for several seconds before mounting the next.

He stole a glance downward, and noticed that a number of Galbadians were not battling the dangerously large fire, but carrying from a bunker what appeared to be a small six-barreled cannon. _Like those third generation AA guns we studied, he realized. The soldiers placed it on a waiting tripod, and started to connect the two at various points. Irvine doubled his pace, climbing rapidly, so quickly in fact that he almost lost his grip and fell on several occasions. Finally he reached the top and tumbled over the edge of the hatch, falling on his back into the Air Room. He raised his head, then drew himself to his feet, and was greeted silently by Quistis, Squall, and Rinoa._

—

Quistis punched the intercom, "Selphie, I'm retracting the ladder now. As soon as it's up, take us out of here." As she finished, her hand went to the winch controls, but Irvine caught her.

"No time." he warned, and pressed the _Detach button. With a small pop and a puff of white gas, it broke free, and was pulled by the ladder's weight up and out of the hatch. _

—

"What are you do-" Quistis demanded, Irvine cutting her short.

"Selphie!" Irvine yelled through the intercom. "Go! Go now!"

"What?!" Selphie's voice buzzed through in response. Irvine groaned audibly.

"Damn, just go!" he hollered in frustration. "Anti-Aircraft fire is comin' our way!"

"Got it." She replied. An instant later, there was a low droning noise as power was transferred to the main thrusters. Squall frowned.

"Don't you think we should seal the hatch before-" His voice was drowned out as the thrusters roared to life. For a moment, the aircraft shuddered, but remained stationary. Then, it accelerated at a frenetic rate. All four felt a falling sensation as they were thrown to the back of the Air Room.

"Shit!" Irvine cursed as he struggled to reach the control panel several feet in front of him. Grimacing, he stretched further and pounded a switch. The hatch whooshed shut, and he collapsed to his knees, panting heavily, his hair hanging all around his face.

Cautiously, Squall stepped forward, as if he would be once again pulled to the wall. When it became clear that he would not, he took several, more determined steps over to Irvine and helped him up.

"Thanks for coming back to get me man," Irvine spoke softly, with relief, and then added, "but bail out on me like that again, kay?" Squall nodded, but his expression did not match.

"I ordered you to withdraw." He said coldly. Irvine gave him a look of indignation and started to the door, where he turned to Rinoa and Quistis and gave a slight incline of his head. As he did, his hand went instinctively to his head, causing him to frown.

"Where's my hat?" he asked.

"I think I saw it go out the hatch when we accelerated." Quistis informed him, and offering her condolences, "Don't worry, you can always get another one." Remorsefully, Irvine turned and trudged out the door. Squall shrugged as he, Quistis, and Rinoa returned to the cockpit in his wake.

Meanwhile, the Ragnorak blew over the final shreds of the coast and sped into open water. Several moments later, the aircraft climbed sharply and faded into the clouds, its passengers blissfully unaware of their observers. _Click. _

—

* *

Rufus poured over the assortment of data discs and reports that allegedly recounted the incidents in Timber thus far; but more and more appeared merely a collection of blurred video images and the exasperatingly technical logs of a lifeless automaton. Bleary eyed, he scanned over the last report, only to find it offered nothing but more meaningless techno babble. Howling in frustration, he cast the printouts aside and pounded his fist on the heavy wooden desk.

"Pray tell, Lavinius! What am I to do with all this?!" He demanded of his adjutant, waving furiously at the jumble that covered his desk. "What would the people, the ignorant masses, make of this jargon? Nothing! We may as well distribute our propaganda in binary!"

"Yes sir, very good sir." Lavinius said uneasily, reaching into a pocket. "Errr, on that topic, we've just received some more footage, and I think perhaps-"

"No, you _didn't think." Rufus whispered intensely. "You merely scooped up all the raw data you could find, like a mindless drone."_

—

"But sir, this one is differentâ€|" He replied cautiously. "I think, errr, the footage contained here could be of great value if the media, the media sir, was compliant. I guarantee!" He proclaimed, his confidence restored.

"Let me see that." Rufus replied, his tone one of both curiosity and skepticism. Rushing to comply, Lavinius fumbled through his pocket and yanked the disc out, thrusting it out to Rufus, who took it slowly and inserted it into his computer. The video began.

Several minutes later, the view screen clicked off and the disc ejected. Rufus smiled darkly.

"Very good, Lavinius. Very good. With someâ€|editing, perfect."

* *

Squall sat uncomfortably in the cockpit, rigid and perfectly upright as the Ragnorak descended over Balamb Island. There was a minute falling sensation, but he ignored it, his expressionless face locked in silent contemplation. The wispy clouds of the night sky parted at last, and he gazed downward at the Balamb's twinkling firefly lights far below. They were oddly beautiful, he realized, his subconscious recalling the day's earlier events. Yet it had finally occurred to him that the present could not alter the past. Try as he might, he felt no shame for the brief solace he found in these earthbound stars.

The true passage of time was imperceptible to him, but it seemed only a brief moment later the Ragnorak was touching down outside Balamb. Beneath the Ragnorak, grass was plastered against the ground as it's immense engines set the craft down gently. It touched down and bounced slightly, hydraulics mostly compensating for the impact. The droning whir of the engines became ever more quiet until they finally shut off. Momentary calm returned, Squall thought his hearing picked up the faint chirp of crickets, and he strained his hearing, listening intently. _Squall, came a seemingly distant voice. _Squall!_—

—

"Squall!" Selphie shouted, waving a hand in his face. "C'mon, we need to go back to Garden!"

"Xu has requested that we report to her at once." Quistis added. Squall winced, blinking his eyes several times as they adjusted to the light.

Examining his surroundings, he saw his comrades all in various modes

of impatience: Irvine, fiddling with his rifle; Quistis holding the lift and fingering her weapon; and Rinoa, gazing off into the night, forlorn and sullen. _We just abandoned some of her closest friends_, he realized. _She acts as if it was her fault, not simply SeeD protocol._

"Okay, let's move out." Squall commanded, his tone firm and authoritative. In a group of SeeDs as experienced as his own, such rudimentary orders were understood and not verbalized, but more than anything he spoke to soothe Rinoa, to distract her from anxiety. His other companions apparently recognized this as they simply nodded in reply and filed onto the lift. In a moment, the two were alone.

"Rinoa," he began softly, extending a hand to her. "I, weâ€|" he paused, searching for words. After a moment, she turned from the stars and looked up at him, understanding in her eyes.

"I know." She replied simply, and with a weak, forced smile, "Well, let's get going." Taking his outstretched hand, she walked briskly towards the lift, leading him by the wrist. As they were about to set foot on the lift, she stopped abruptly and again faced Squall.

"Squall, you're not giving up onâ€| are you? Promiseâ€|" She choked on her words, emotion surfacing regardless of any attempt to suppress it. Uninhibited, tears welled up in her eyes, and she collapsed into his arms. Squall held her reassuringly, but again found himself unable to produce any soothing words. The uncomfortable silence between the two persisted, broken only by her muffled sobs. He tightened his arms around her and rested his head on hers, taking in the feel and mild scent of her silky jet hair.

As Rinoa wept into his chest, Squall became abruptly aware of unusual feelings within him. Utterly alien at first sight, however he sensed another, deeper element: one that he could not fully perceive. Beneath an outlandish exterior, these feelings were a fundamental and immutable piece of him. More specifically, he experienced a sudden urge to push her away, and in his confusion he did.

"Squall!" Rinoa let out a startled yelp, loosing her footing momentarily and falling onto the back of one of the chairs, propping herself up by her elbows. Squall, equally taken aback, recoiled several steps, almost stumbling into a bulkhead behind him. For a moment, he shook his head quickly, looking nervously from side to side, before he realized what he had done.

"Rinoaâ€|" He muttered, face expressionless, but concern filling his eyes and voice. He started towards her cautiously, slowly as if to dissuade her from fleeing, which, given the events transpiring moments prior, did not seem to him a remote possibility. As he approached, she pressed herself further back against the chair and stood crouched, but supported by her own feet, not unlike a cornered animal, readying itself for fight or flight. Mindful of her justifiable apprehension, Squall halted and dropped to one knee.

"Rinoa, I'm sorry." He said simply and honestly, offering a hand out to her. Rinoa glanced about nervously, and as if her instincts had concluded that there was no escape, she appeared to concede. She

stood upright and lifted her right hand slowly and in segments, prepared to pull back at an instant's notice, but eventually, her hand was outstretched, only inches from his. Warily, she put her left foot forward and stepped towards him.

At that instant, her trepidation dissolved and she clasped Squall's waiting hand firmly and smiled. As Squall exhaled his relief, she giggled suddenly and quickly clasped her free hand over her mouth, only the twinkle in her eyes intimating her mirth.

"What is it?" Squall asked, half frowning, confused, and entirely oblivious. Rinoa shook her head and sighed, her face reddening as though she could bear no more. Her left hand, removed from her mouth, fluttered wildly through the air, her best attempt at illustrating the source of her laughter. Following her hand with his eyes, Squall was finally able to grasp the apparent cause of her amusement, and in doing so blushed.

He realized, of course, their relative positions: Rinoa, reaching her hand out and taking his; and himself, kneeling before her and looking up. Rinoa stepped towards him, still laughing, and the red flush of his face deepened further. She eyed him expectantly, receiving only a mildly annoyed glare in response.

"Of course I will," she joked. "you can get up now." Squall snapped to his feet and stood perfectly upright, almost rigid. For a short time they said nothing again, making intense eye contact, to the point where Squall blinked his eyes in an attempt to focus them. After another moment of heavy silence, Rinoa stepped forward, leaned in, and kissed him. Astounded by her forwardness and erratic behavior, it took Squall several seconds to recover from his surprise and return the kiss.

An eternity seemed to pass before she broke off and wrapped her arms tightly around his neck and pressing herself to him. He returned a weak embrace, staring blackly into the distance, scrutinizing his emotions and his newfound compulsions. Eventually, the two released and proceeded down the lift.

* *

> Rinoa clung tightly to herself, arms folded across her chest as she and Squall walked down the gangway of the Ragnarok and into the night's cold ocean breeze. On the ground Irvine, Selphie, and Quistis awaited, milling around and engaging sporadically in uninspired, forced conversation in order to pass the time. Another breeze came up, causing her to shiver. Squall took notice and offered her his jacket, which she readily accepted, wrapping the warm, heavy black leather around her narrow shoulders. It was the least he could do, yet to him such a gesture felt awkward, overly sensitive.<p>

In the nearly pitch black, Rinoa shut her eyes and took in the other senses of Balamb. The faint crashing of distant waves was audible, but only barely above the active cricket population; and the scent was a fresh, slightly salty one. Opening her eyes again, she looked skyward and saw that the clouds had cleared and the stars were gleaming brilliantly. Save the temperature, it was truly a beautiful night.

But as soon as Rinoa had begun to relax and enjoy her setting, the tranquility was shattered by the bass rumble of an internal combustion engine and blaring high beam lights. A medium sized vehicle, bearing the black and white Garden logo, pulled up approximately ten feet in front of the Ragnorak. The engine shut off, and the passenger side door slid open to reveal Xu and several other Seed administrators. She hopped out and jogged towards Squall, stopping directly in front of him and saluting. Squall was about to protest her formality but as he opened his mouth she began to speak.

"Commander!" She nearly shouted, her voice dripping discipline and a carefully rehearsed address. "Reporting sir!"

"That's good enough." Squall said, motioning her to an "at ease" posture. "We need to report to Headmaster Cid on the current situation, so let's proceed to Garden now."

"Right." She replied, dropping her tone and settling for an incline of the head rather than a full salute. "Get in the van." She about faced quickly and trotted towards the waiting vehicle, followed by Squall and the other Seeds.

Rinoa lingered behind, Squall noticed, but chose not to intervene. _She's probably wondering what happened in the cockpit_. He shuddered, realizing he was equally curious, and though he better suppressed it, equally frightened if not more so. As he stepped into the van, she turned broke from her slight trance and hurried to join the others. She stepped in and Xu slid the door shut. The engine sputtered to life and then roared momentarily, causing a minor jolt while the van began to move.

Xu stood to the front of the compartment, next to a large screen, which displayed a still frame of the Garden logo on a sky blue background.

"The Galbadians are jamming communications in the Timber region," Squall started in. so I'll need to bring you up to date on the situation."

"All in time." She responded. "However, there may be moreâ€| pressing issues at the moment."

"Such as?"

"Well, I don't suppose you've been watching the news?"

4. Default Chapter Title

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Oak Trees and Angel Wings

-Part 4-

by DJ Johnston

The SeeD van rumbled slowly down the rough, poorly maintained road to Balamb Garden, shaking as it rolled over a small ditch. Inside, Squall ignored the jolt, focusing his attention on the Galbadian news broadcast, which played in the front of the vehicle. He watched silently while the anchor introduced the camera footage.

"We received footage of the SeeDs attack from an anonymous press associate within the military." The anchorman spoke in a carefully measured, almost rhythmic fashion, but his tone betrayed no emotion as was expected of his position.

A moment after he finished speaking, the screen flipped to the grainy, poorly lighted image of a security camera. From a $\frac{3}{4}$ overhead view, Squall was able to make out the dark form of Zell, attacking a pair of Galbadian soldiers. As the SeeD set upon them, the two troopers tried with futility to defend themselves with their swords, but they were quickly disarmed. A moment later, the two had both been knocked unconscious, their assailant fleeing from the camera's field of vision.

The final blows were then replayed in slow motion, as Squall observed in an effort to embellish the mercenary's brutality and ensuing flight. The image froze with Zell in a sprinting position, half way through the open door, and after several seconds returned to the anchor.

"From this footage alone," The anchor began, his tone devoid of malice, while simultaneously disdainful in the utmost. "It is clear that the mercenaries' attack was unwarranted, spontaneous, and rather vicious. However, as the day progresses into night, the attackers are not deterred in their gall, but instead gain confidence under the cover of darkness."

The view changed again, this time to a video of Irvine in the G-Army bunker, twin pistols pumping two shots into the chest of a Galbadian sergeant. The trooper stumbled backwards with his hands in the air, an expression of pain and surprise on his face, clutched his chest, and fell over dead. The view lingered on this scene for another second before flipping to an image of Squall slashing wildly at a group of G-soldiers. This second was just time enough for Squall to notice something strange: Irvine's expression while he stood, smoking guns in hand, looked suspiciously unnatural. Rather than his slight casual smile smirk, or even his calm, cool look of concentration, he grinned with sadistic glee, his mouth wide open and his eyes glimmering with foreboding light. After the scene of Squall ended as well, the anchor began to speak again but was muffled by Irvine's complaint.

"Hey!" He demanded. "Why didn't anyone tell me I look so stupid under fire?!? That's not me at all! Geezâ€|" Squall began to lift his hand for silence, but stopped as a thought occurred to him. _What if it's not?_ He pondered._ Video editing can be pretty convincing nowadays, they could easily change a face, and the soldiers we fought definitely had weapons before._

"And now, we bring you a live conference, via satellite, with Galbadia's presidential front-runner, Senator Rufus." The anchor turned to face a large screen in the back of the room, and a moment later Rufus appeared on the screen, dressed in a black suit and relaxing in a leather chair behind his desk. The anchor wasted no time in beginning the interview.

"Senator, thank you for speaking with us this evening."

"No trouble at all, thank you." Rufus replied with a casual hand gesture.

"Sir, if I'm not mistaken, you were the one who initially commissioned SeeD for the Timber situation."

"That's correct," He said, running a hand through his dark red hair. "of course I never would have guessed that this would happen."

"Of course." Repeated the anchor, completely confident as if to stress the point. "So, what's the next course of action? What's your take?"

"Well, my time in the army taught me one thing--not to give in. I refuse to meet the demands of these terrorists, that's why SeeD was dispatched in the first place."

"Yes, but SeeD turned on your forces, do you think in retrospect it might have been wiser to dispatch some of your own special forces?"

"I'm glad you asked. That seems to be a major question. My intention in commissioning SeeD was to deal with the situation as quickly and painlessly as possible. The regular army forces in the area are unequipped to handle a hostage situation, and using them would only increase the loss of life. Furthermore, all the G-army Special Forces are on extended leave or on duty in Esthar, under the leadership of General Caraway. So my purpose in hiring SeeD was to resolve the situation quickly, and with less risk to the lives of good, honest Galbadian citizens."

"And what do you plan to now?"

"Obviously, my people are looking into a number of different options. Currently are most viable solution seems to be deployment of a Special Forces group. I'd like give you better detail, but I'm not at liberty to discuss certain matters, and quite honestly, we haven't reached a definite conclusion yet."

"What of SeeD?"

Rufus paused, pondering his response. After a moment, he spoke, "This is not the first time Garden has taken hostile action against Galbadia, and if nothing is done, be assured it will not be the last. I intend to do everything in my power to apprehend the individuals responsible, as well as conducting a thorough investigation of the Garden command structure, in order to root out administrative corruption. Galbadia will not, cannot, tolerate continued attacks, enough lives have been lost already."

"Of course, only time will tell what the future truly holds. I'm

sorry, but that's all the time we have. Senator, thank you again for speaking with us."

"Good evening." Rufus replied with a slight inclination of his head. The screen with Rufus went blank and within the space of a second the anchor once again occupied center screen. He began to describe a press conference held earlier in the day, but Squall arose and switched off the television, cutting the man off in mid-sentence and reverting the screen to the image of the Garden logo on blue.

"What now?" He inquired of Xu.

"You're the commander, sir." She replied, shrugging. Squall frowned, his eyes narrowed to slits. Xu conceded. "However I suggest we await further development, see if Rufus will perpetuate his threats against Garden. In the mean time, we should recall Seed as a precautionary measure and postpone all missions until further notice."

"Do it." He instructed simply; she nodded and activated a comm. on the wall.

"Garden Command, this is Xu." She spoke into the comm.

"This is Garden Command," The speaker buzzed. "state your request."

"We have Priority Alpha Prime order to withdraw, transmit to all Seed squads currently in the field. Disregard all preexisting instructions, this is a Code Red override: withdraw and return to Balamb Garden immediately."

The operator responded, "Priority Alpha Prime requires verification from Commander Leonhart, voice authentication." Xu turned to Squall, who nodded slowly, rose, and grumbling quietly, approached the comm.

"This is Commander Leonhart," Said Squall. "initialize voice match, file 483."

"Initializingâ€¦| alright, input now."

Squall spoke slowly and carefully, tone completely controlled, "Omicronâ€¦| Deltaâ€¦| whatever." He finished with the deadpan tone that was his trademark, producing giggles from Rinoa and Selphie. Directing his intense gaze towards the two and raising a hand for silence yielded the desired effect, and left the women fidgeting quietly, uneasily. Satisfied, he returned to his seat.

After a moment, the comm. buzzed in again, "Voice match 80 percent, 90 percentâ€¦|voice match verified, thank you Commander Leonhart, sir. Transmitting withdraw signal, all bandsâ€¦|done. Garden Command out."

"Thank you command, Xu out." She switched the comm. off and resumed her position by the forward door. In some time, the vehicle rolled into Garden and came gently to a halt within the parking area.

Squall was the first to step out, and stood by the side of the door while the others filed out, the rhythmic beating of their footsteps

broken only by the faint metallic click as the garage door locked itself. The mood was one of silence and reflection, yet the air remained heavy with excitement, anticipation, and dread for the uncertain future.

For a time, the SeedS stood in a broken circle around the vehicle, saying nothing, each alone, lost in their own thoughts. Squall surveyed his comrades, his gaze shifting slowly from one face to the next until his it came to rest on an abnormally sullen Rinoa. Though she was oblivious to his attention, his blue eyes, unfazed, fixed themselves on her.

In a moment, Rinoa, feeling Squall's piercing eyes probing her as surely as if they were needles, turned to face him. Their eyes met and locked; Squall peered through into her soul, contemplating her feelings.

Being for so long nearly void of personal emotion and insensitive to the sentiment of others had left him lacking in his ability to identify emotion, be it his own or that of another. With reckless disregard, he had classified all emotion as irrationality and weakness, including any of his own that managed to force its way through his thorough mental suppression. On such rare occasions, he tired endlessly in an effort to exorcise what he thought to be vestiges of insanity, and this quest for cold spiritual perfection was vastly successful in alienating him from emotion entirely. The absence of his own feelings led to a sharp decline in general empathy; he had no personal experience on which to base a comparison and in doing so recognize others' feelings. Because of this, his ability to recognize and address others' feelings, whether to console, subdue, or otherwise, was noticeably lacking. Granted, he concealed this incapacity well: by dismissing Quistis' grief as weakness and codependence; Irvine's cockiness as lurid folly; Rinoa's frustration with him as childish upset. Always he blamed the other's flaw of emotion, and ultimately deceived himself and all save his muted heart, into believing that he truly did not care. But no longer, as he was reminded every waking moment he spent in her company.

It always brought him some small degree of satisfaction to know that he understood her feelings so well. But he felt now anguish as well to sense the turmoil and fear that prevailed in her heart, and to recognize that he was the source of her anxiety. Considering his behavior that day, he was hardly surprised by her reaction—his abandonment of Zell and, more focally, the recent cockpit incident were actions in no way characteristic of him, Squall Leonhart. _Whatever_, he concluded, _I need to deal with Rufus for now._

With that in mind, he started for the door leading to the main area of Garden, but was stopped by Quistis, "Squall, where are you going?" He sighed with irritation.

"I need to make an announcement about my plans." He replied

"You don't have any plans yet."

"I'll think of something."

"You need to rest."

"Please excuse me." He persisted, visibly frustrated.

"Squall!" She pleaded, throwing her arms up in exasperation. "What difference does it make whether make an announcement tonight or tomorrow morning? It's been a hard day for all of us, and we're all too tired to come up with any sort of plan anyway. What we need now is sleep."

"Fine." He conceded. Quistis nodded, sidestepping quickly out of his way as he began to walk again. He trudged over to the door, pausing for a second while it slid away to grant him entrance. As he stepped through, Quistis again called to him.

"Be on the bridge at 0800!"

"Whateverâ€¦" he grumbled. _Rinoa._

* *

Only a moment later, or so it seemed to him, Squall was strolling leisurely down the Dormitory hallway, the sounds of crickets filling the air and Rinoa at his side. After every few paces, he would stop, to drink deeply of cool the midnight air; or for a fleeting glimpse of the cloudless, starry sky; or to steal a glance at the woman beside him. For the latter, he would try his utmost to continue their walk and not at all disturb her oblivious tranquility, as though through her silence and his, he was imbued by her radiance. Yet so captivated was he by her beauty, that whenever he looked at her he could not stop, falling nearly into a trance, only to be rudely awakened by an embarrassing stumble. Last time had been no exception; in fact, while trying fruitlessly to regain his balance, he had seized her arm and subsequently pulled her down on top of him as he fell.

Rinoa still laughing softly, Squall's face still flushed crimson, the two arrived at his dormitory. She clung to his free arm, smiling, as he fumbled ineptly for his key. After a moment, he located it and unlocked the door. Suddenly, Rinoa released herself from his side and shot into the room eagerly, vanishing from sight as if into the distance. At the instant wherein she wholly vanished, he saw a bright flash, almost as if she had caught the light. He paused, squinting from the light; his incessant frown deepened with perplexity, and he made his way slowly, dazedly into the room.

Suddenly, he found himself, alone, in a place greatly alien, and made even more so by the contrast between his expected and observed destinations: anticipating his small, nearly claustrophobic dorm room, he was confronted instead with a sweeping desert. _What the hell?_

He squeezed his eyes shut, left them for a time shut tightly, and then, assured at least in part that he was not in fact dreaming, opened them to survey his surroundings once again, thinking it was perhaps a hallucinationâ€"one that would, quite literally, fade with a blink of an eye. While this too proved unsuccessful, he did experience some new sense of familiarity with this environment, his mind suddenly awash in the sickening bilge of memories better forgotten; it struck himâ€"_the field_.

"Quite right." A voice came as if echoing, as eerily familiar as his

locale. "At least your memory appears to be intactâ€¦or at any rate you have yet to forget your little time compression ordeal."

Slightly startled but losing no more than a second from the surprise, he whirled around, hands darting to Lionheart, secured by double belts to his hip. With lightning speed that was the culmination of his 12 years at Garden, he drew the gunblade and lunged, point forward, towards his perceived adversary. His foe, caught slightly off guard, stumbled back a pace and swung his own weapon in a wide crescent. There was an airy whistling, blue and silver streaks cut through the air. Squall flinched but maintained the thrust; the blades met with a crash, the force of his enemy's swing disarming him. Lionheart clattered harmlessly on the cracked, dusty earth while Squall, seeing his opponents blade cocked back for another slash, lashed out with his left leg, catching the attacker in the chest and sending him tumbling backwards.

Still acting reflexively and wasting no time, he recovered his gunblade and made for his downed opponent. He raised it above his head to deliver a killing blow, when suddenly he recognized the face of the stranger.

"Hahahaha, ahhh. Just like old times." Said the man of about his age, strikingly nonchalant, given his circumstances. "Ehâ€¦" His relaxed attitude was even reminiscent ofâ€¦ "â€¦puberty boy?" _Seifer_. He smirked, cool as ever, even while Squall loomed over him, ready to deliver his death. Squall hesitated.

"Ooohh, little Squally too nice and chivalrous?" He mocked, still prone on the ground. "Sir Leonhart too honorable to finish his hated foe? Doesn't want to tarnish the honor of his Lady Sorceress' name?" Squall growled in response, adjusting his grip uneasily, and inching the tip of his gunblade ever closer to Seifer's throat. Seifer, seeing the berserk, feverish look in his adversary's eyes, smirked anew, then threw his head back and laughed.

"Aaaaaagh!" Squall roared, raising Lionheart overhead again, then slicing down, kicking up dust as the blade buried itself in the brittle earth on which Seifer's head had rested a mere moment before. Squall yanked the blade from the ground, heaving himself off balance as it came free. At the same instant, Seifer, his evasive roll completed, jumped to his feet and counterattacked, slashing wildly and blindly, clearly frightened.

Squall ducked easily under the broad but clumsy overhead swing, then parried a blow coming down on his head. The two disengaged their blades simultaneously, Lionheart cocked to Squall's right, Seifer's Hyperion pulled back into a guarded position, its wielder trying to anticipate Squall's attack. A split second later, Lionheart whistled through the air, Squall performing a rising slash for Seifer's chest. Hyperion went straight out in an attempt to turn the blow aside; Lionheart impacted, grinding along the blade's cutting edge until Seifer, with a flick of the wrist, sent it upwards, grazing his arm. With a yelp he recoiled, cradling his forearm, where blood oozed from a shallow wound and soaked into the thick fabric of his coat. Hyperion hung limply at his side, held weakly in the hand of his afflicted arm.

Squall lowered his gunblade slightly, baffled by the man's dramatic

reaction to what, for him, should have been quite negligible an injury. He took a wary step towards Seifer, but when his action was greeted with no aggression, relaxed his grip further, and took another step. Suddenly, Seifer groaned painfully and lurched forward, his back bent as though he could barely maintain his balance; he raised his head to Squall.

"This is notâ€|" he coughed, tears running down his pain contorted face. "Thisâ€|"

"What?" Squall prompted, his voice newly fraught with concern. "Are you alright, what is it?" Abruptly, Seifer's grimace evaporated into his ever-present smirk, and Squall stumbled back a step, doubly perplexed. He realized his folly in time to raise Lionheart to his chest, and his opponent's blade sparked along his own, then bit deep into his forehead. Darkness, and then, a familiar light, viewed through unfamiliar eyes.__

5. Default Chapter Title

> <meta name="ProgId"> Oak Trees and Angel Wings

Oak Trees and Angel Wings

Part 5

By DJ Johnston

This is fucked. Watts huddled beneath the one still intact window, and watched the scene silently. The lone Seed paced across the bar roomâ€"back, forth, and again as though it were the only thing that kept him sane. Others had adopted similarly mindless activities to pass the time, but specifics aside, every man had withdrawn into himself, and as such no words were spoken to relieve the heavy silence. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead, then rolled down and off his brow and stung his eyes. _ And damn it's hot._

It was sweltering. Between the claustrophobic conditions, the eleven eager but untried resistance fighters, the six increasingly jittery hostages, and one exceedingly volatile Seed, the heat was becoming steadily less tolerable. It had been uncomfortable at first, but bearable. Now, however, being balled into about 3 square feet of floor space, having hardly moved for the past four hours, it was a wonder he wasn't already hallucinatingâ€"all made worse by the distinct lack of progress in what Zone had rather loosely termed their "negotiations" _Why did I everâ€"what?!_

His wallowing in self-pity was interrupted by a muted, mechanical sliding sound, followed by a hollow click. He turned towards its source to see one of Zone's demolition charges suddenly alive, low beeps issuing from it in unison with a flashing warning: ARMED. He glanced at Zone, leaning against the bar, remote detonator in hand, tinkering with its controls.

"Holy shit no!" Watts bellowed, and in one motion launched himself to his feet and his companion. Zone, intent on his work, glanced up absentmindedly.

"â€|The hell?" He was only able to manage a bewildered grunt before

Watts ploughed into him and both were knocked sprawling. The detonator sailed across the room and clattered on the floor near the back wall. Unaware of this, Watts began to grapple his stunned comrade, bearing down with his full force.

"What in hell is wrong with you?!" Zone choked..

"Give me the remote!" Watts shrieked.

"What are you talk-"

"Just give it to me dammit!"

"Whoa! Calm down!" Zell instructed, wrapped his arms around Watts' waste, and began to pry him off. Watts fought against his pull, thrashing around in a vain attempt to break the Seed's implacable grip. Zell's military conditioning prevailed, and Watts' fingertips scored several red streaks on Zone's throat as he succumbed to Zell's irresistible force. Wrenched completely free from Zone, he was shoved roughly aside as Zell knelt to inspect Zone's conditioning.

Still frenzied, he lunged for the would-be mediator, hands and fists lashing out with a flurry of ineffectual attacks that his far superior opponent avoided with ease. When a left hook came within striking distance of his head, Zell intercepted the blow, catching his wrist, and swung him into a table.

He crashed into the tabletop and it splintered apart, depositing him in a heap of wooden rubble on the floor. Zell turned abashedly to the bartender.

"Uhh, sorry. If you want I can-"

"What the hell is all this?!" Zone demanded. "Stop acting like little kids! Did either of you ever stop to ponder what might happen if the G-Army decided to attack now?!"

Zell frowned indignantly. _Can't you see I'm saving your ass from this psychopath?_ He turned to Zone and opened his mouth to reply, but was preemptively interrupted by a sudden growl from Watts. The Seed returned his attention to him, and saw him grab a broken leg from the wreckage of the table, and, holding it aloft, splintered point down, charged at him. Taken aback by the smaller man's recovery and aggression, Zell became immediately wary of him, abandoning restraint to deal fully with his _enemy_.

Watts stabbed at him with his makeshift weapon, but before the point could connect, he caught him by the wrist again, and squeezed viciously until he was convinced he could grasp it no tighter. A second later, there was a muffled double crack as he broke it with a violent, singular twist. There was a yelp of pain and astonishment, and a discarded table leg fell to the tiled floor.

"Agggggghhhhhâ€" He wailed, but was cut short as Zell, to complete his initial attack, at once released his hold on the injured wrist and brought a mailed fist up, catching his vanquished opponent in the jaw. Watts, blood leaking from his mouth and running freely down his chin, staggered several steps backwards, before blacking out and a collapsing back into the pile of wood formerly a table.

"Oh well this is just great!" Zone shouted at Zell. "Can someone please tell me _what the fuck_â€" Zell, ignoring him, ran to the fallen form of Watts, and began to cast Curaga, but was interrupted as the limp form shuddered suddenly and began to cough.

"The hell?" Muttered a perplexed Zell. It was an extraordinarily violent cough, in fact the guy appeared to be hacking up blood by the pint and spewing it all over his person. After a moment, however, it occurred to him that it was no cough at allâ€" _He's choking, must've bitten his tongue pretty hard_. He turned him on his side and held him there until he had flushed out what looked to be enough to at least allow some passage, then cast Curaga on the injured wrist.

Restorative magic would work almost instantaneously on lacerations such as Watts' tongue (which hardly even necessitated anything beyond a sprinkling of Potion), but bones were a different matter entirely. But given the circumstances of the break, Zell was grateful for this, as it gave him the time to manipulate the injured area and correctly position the bones as they knit back together.

When he was satisfied that everything within his power was done, he laid Watts on the floor to rest and stood up, even allowing himself to feel slightly satisfied. _At least_, he thought, recalling his medical training, _Garden teaches us how to undo our damage_.

"Well this is just peachy!" Zone, seeing Zell unoccupied, elected him the new target of complaints. "The G-Army must be laughing its ass off at us! Is he even alive still?"

"Hey!" He snapped, then took a moment to regain his composure. "He's gonna be fine. He's just exhausted. Curaga is a great thing to have, but it can take a lot out of a body. He just needs rest."

"I'm _sure_ _it can. Geez, could things possibly get any worse?!"

"Well, in my experienceâ€"|" With a groan, Zone buried his face in his hands. "When you ask 'can things be any worse?', they get worse. That's what Ma always used to tell me."

"Well thenâ€"|" He hissed. "I guess Iâ€"| _jinxed_ us. OOPS!"

On cue, the lights flickered for a moment, then went off all together. Zell moaned, and for a split second all was quiet as realization set in among the others.

Remain at ease, fated one. Bahamut's disembodied voice urged him. _Okay okay, I'm fine_. He responded, taking a deep, controlled breath to prove it.

Your comrades are similarly advised.__

"Holy-!" _Too late._

* *

Squall awoke swiftly, and with relief at finding himself in his own bed; Rinoa beside himâ€"everything exactly as he had left it. He awoke without event, not in a cold sweat ,nor panting, nor with any

such symptoms to confirm his faint recollection of a nightmare.

In fact, if the young lady beside him, yet serene in slumber, was any indicator, he had awakened without so much as the tossing and turning to which he was proneâ€"even on those rare occasions wherein he forced himself (or was otherwise compelled) to bed at some semblance of a reasonable hour. Of course, as he observed, getting to bed is not necessarily synonymous with sleep.

Rinoa stirred suddenly, moving softly against him as if roused by the thought and its entourage of sordid detail, and eliciting a blush. He shook his head roughly, in an effort to clear and focus his mind.

Whatever, I'd better get up before I wake her too. He sat up, then paused momentarily, _I haven't had a nightmare in years anyway_. He slid out of bed, took some clothes from the rail by the bed that had functioned as his ad hoc dresser ever since (and before) Rinoa had more or less moved in, and then paused again, looking down at her.

She was so peaceful, so still whilst sleeping, he observed, as to seem almost corpselike in the pallid, ethereal blue moonlight. Again he chided himself for the twisted thought_. I'm not bloody Seifer! How could I think of Rinoaâ€"moonlight?! Looking to his alarm clock, he fought back the urge to shout. _0430, it's no wonder she's still asleep._

—

Perhaps, he decided, it would be best now to sneak out of the dorm, leaving her to rest alone and undisturbed. Yesterday had been more than a little stressful for her, and, lacking his Seed training, she needed any rest she could get. _And I'm sure Xu and Quistis will probably have me doing other things from 0830 onwards. This is a good opportunity to at least get in a bit of practice at the Training Center. _

That in mind, he crept through the unlit room toward the cracks of yellow light that outlined the door. He knelt beside it to retrieve his gunblade, and after fumbling through the darkness for a time, he felt the hard shell of its case under his hands. Arranging it before him on the floor, he snapped it open slowly, discreetly, and began to lift open the top so deliberately as to border on reverence.

As the blackness drew away to reveal Lion Heart and across his chest was cast a slender bar of light from resonating blade. A faded sky blue, and possessed of an otherworldly quality, much like the moonlight that filled his window, the narrow band of light widened steadily, soon enveloping the entire room.

He took hold of the gunblade's handle, when suddenly a twinkling of light caught his eye. Relaxing his grip on the handle, he bent closer and saw, dangling from the pommel, a pair of polished silver wingsâ€"a gift from Rinoa shortly after the defeat of Ultimecia.

Naturally, he had been loath to even bother with so trivial a concession, (a token of her affection, he assured himself) for that reason and because replacing the Sleeping Lionheart icon would mean

betting his gunblade on Zell's incessantly mediocre metalwork. But there, he had then realized, was the mentality of a soldier in a world that was, hopefully and at long last, losing its need for soldiers. He could afford to be impractical, for her sake.****

Speaking of practicality, if Rinoa were to get her way (she would), then he would be having a shower and breakfast before he went anywhere, but at least this way he might avoid reporting late. Lionheart slipped into its mold as the case clicked shut he slipped into the bathroom. It might even, he pondered, earn him the favor of his lady. At least, he could afford to be optimistic.

* *

"-shit!" The cry came as the preamble to a general panic.

Rebels scrambled for flashlights and weapons while a few tried to maintain order, all amid the incessant chatter of their captives and punctuated with cries of "We're all going to die!".

"Okay people. _Calm down._ Everything is under control." Zone instructed from the center of the commotion, his tone firm but controlledâ€|no response.

"I said calm the fuck down!" He screamed. "Everybody! Sit down and shut up!" No response.

"Agghhh!" Trying to articulate his frustration with a bestial roar, he snatched his rifle off one of the tables and aimed it towards the ceiling.

"No!" Zell shouted, and, dropping his flashlight, started for Zone as he fumbled for the safety. He was too late. It clicked off at the same instant he ploughed into Zone.

Zone yanked the trigger back, causing a staccato bark as the weapon spat a torrent of wild shots. They struck the overhead light fixtures, showering the bar room with sparks and glass fragments, others slammed into the bar or the tables and chairs, and others still ricocheted off the ceiling, floor, and walls. Thenâ€|silence, save the clatter of the rifle's smoking magazine ejected onto the floor.

"That's better." He whispered, discarding the unloaded rifle.

"Are you crazy?!" Zell shouted in his face. "The hell do you think you're doin'?! They're gonna bust us for sure thanks to you! If you don't just kill us all yourself!"

"Hey, hey," Zone said apologetically. "so maybe I overreacted a little, but trust me: _everything_ is un-"

"_Nothing_ _is_ under control! You're gonna get us all killed!"

"Hey, you know what?â€|"

As they continued their argument, neither took any notice of the clamoring G-Soldiers outside, or anything else, until a dull silver canister sailed through a broken window near the front and rolled

into the middle of the room

"What theâ€¦oh _shit_!" Zone seized the remote detonator and frantically began to calibrate it.

"Look away!" Zell shouted, bringing his hands up to shield his eyes as best he could. There was a roar and an iridescent flash, which lit Timber Square, for a fleeting instant, bright as day.

* *

"Squallâ€¦tickles." Rinoa mumbled, eyes closed gently and facial features relaxed as if asleep. _As if_, she thought playfully, suppressing a smirk of satisfaction.

"Squall, stopâ€¦tickles." This time she was only able to produce a halfhearted moan. Premature awakening was invariably bothersome, but awakening to his caresses was a special instance, made all the better by her surprise.

I had it coming after yesterday, she recalled fondly, _but to thinkâ€¦like this_. _Is this the real Squall?_ Inexperienced as he was (_Well it _is_ Squall_), she never wanted him to stop. She suspected that this might be simply a ploy to take her mind off he friends in Timber, but, to his credit, she couldn't imagine a better implementation.

Suddenly, his gentle strokes became abruptly heavierâ€¦"heavy, hot, and wet, she could not prevent an incriminating gasp from escaping as she squirmed under his touch.

"Well you're certainly feeling frisky." She said breathlessly. He barked in agreement.

"Huh?" She and Squall said in unison, the latter having entered at that very moment, bearing a tray apparently borrowed from the cafeteria. He stood dumbfounded in the doorway, staring blankly at Rinoa and Angelo and struggling to make sense of the scene.

"Aren't you going to say something?" Rinoa prompted, blushing.

"â€¦"

"What?!"

"â€¦Was it good for you?" The already present pink flush in her cheeks deepened to a full crimson; a miniscule smile played across his lips. He eyed her smugly.

"Be quiet!" She snapped, feeling terribly conspicuous as she sat up and slid out of bed.

"I didn't say anything." She paused immediately, considering this.

"Meany!"

"Well at least," Squall replied, holding the tray up momentarily. "I got us some breakfast."

"Oh, how generous of your highness! Ahhhâ€|" She sighed, hands clasped over her heart in a sarcastic flourish of theatrical melodrama. "Cafeteria breakfastâ€|how ever shall I repay your kindness?"

"_Hmmm_â€|" He pondered loudly, and set the food down on their small kitchen table. He beckoned to her, and she ran eagerly into his embrace. For a minute, they exchanged no words through their heated kissing.

Finally, she broke away, and, to his bewilderment, began to sob. His brow fraught with concern, he pulled her closer, and she cried into his chest as a shudder ran through her suddenly frail body.

"We, we justâ€|left them." She stuttered.

_Of _ _course._ His lips moved to speak, yet no words of comfort were to be found, and he left them parted, but raised his head and gazed forlornly into nothing. Several minutes were passed in this way before she recovered.

"Promise me," She whispered. "that we'll go back for them?" He nodded.

"I promise." _If I can_.

"And-!" She continued abruptly, piping in hoarsely the instant he finished, then fading back to a whisper. "â€|that you won't leave me too."

"Never." He promised. "Just stay close to me."

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6. Default Chapter Title

> <meta name="ProgId"> Oak Trees and Angel Wings

Oak Trees and Angel Wings

-Part VI-

DJ Johnston

Even from backstage, Rufus could hear the crowd going wild. _Fools_, he sneered, _laugh and be merry_. The sneer faded, and he smiled his "confident" smile, throwing in the odd salutatory nod to aid in giving the impression of spontaneityâ€|once more to be sure everything was memorizedâ€|and it was perfect.

He stood fully upright, so that the long coat of his dress uniform came to just below the knees. He checked over the whole accoutrement, straightening the lapels, then shaking out the sleeves, making everything just shy of perfect (he had to be sufficiently casual).

Special attention was given to the Captain's braids.

Captain indeed. They needn't know that he wore his uncle's old uniform. They needn't know that he was 2nd Lieutenant Rufus, who graduated from officer's school a week before the close of the Sorceress War and was discharged in another.

He was to be the product of a fine military tradition, a fine man and a fine soldier, who served his country to the utmost. With his "confident" smile, he knew it wasn't just the uniform, either—he truly looked the part.

"Indeed," He whispered to the mirror. "Indeed I do. I would vote for me. If only I was an actor, and I could take this full bodied mask of a person, and cast it. Keep it in my mind as if it were in the closet, fish it out and put it on whenever necessary. Ahh, but then are we not all players?"

That was more truth than he'd want anyone outside his business to know, but only raving conspiracy theorists would believe that. To his fellow Galbadians, heretofore the ignorant masses, every sneeze of his dripped with honesty—not to mention passion, conviction, and every other vocabulary word straight out of Electability 101.

"And we must go forth, this very hour—_this very hour_!" He spoke with sweeping gestures and haughty tones, as though giving a speech. "Go forth to our homes, and cut the throats of our wives and children!" He continued, mimicking the crowd's response in a squeaky falsetto. "Ooohh, vote for Rufus! Vote for Rufus!"

"Sir?" Came Lavinius' voice through the door, his tone more uneasy than usual, and mingled with urgency. Evidently, he had heard quite a bit and had dallied too long in hearing it. "Y-you're on, sir."

"Ahh, wonderful."

"Yes sir."

Rufus about faced quickly and marched out of his dressing room, toward the balcony where he would make his announcement. _Now that_, he thought, _is a balcony with history_. Since its construction, it had been the site of both the rise and fall of approximately every Galbadian ruler. If nothing else, this proved that he was in the big time. _They probably don't even let that bleeding-heart liberal Redanetov on the premises_.

A pair of Palace Guard, uniformed with equal splendor, drew open the twin oak doors. They saluted wordlessly as Rufus passed through and out to the balcony. He continued for a brief moment in darkness, before the spotlights caught him by the podium.

At once his amoeboid crowd of supporters replaced hubbub with roaring. Typically modest, he ignored them and proceeded with his address. He cleared his throat and began:

"My fellow Galbadians," He paused then, and waited for the ensuing applause to subside. "Countrymen, there is a crisis facing our country today. For too long, politicians have reigned supreme over a land, our land bought in the blood of our forefathers and guaranteed

for the people. For too long, dictators have flown the banner of righteousness, whilst they plunge a knife into the back of democracy, then flee into the tangled skeins of their own beauraucracies, forever to evade justice. For too long, the common man has been reduced to a common slave, denied the prosperity that is his birthright in our great nation. For too long, we have made war against our own phantoms, where there would be peace. I have long considered these problems. This crisis has been two decades in the making, butâ€”_but_â€”it shall be over before this year is past. More lives may be lost, but they shall be in the name of peace. The blood of the martyrs shall be the seed of a Galbadian rebirth! And to usher in this new era, we must remove even the vestigial roots of the old. There shall be our battleâ€”" He paused ominously. "â€”Seed. Seed must be brought to its knees, if we ourselves are to rise, and standing usher in a new era. "

* *

Squall's eyes could be seen to glaze over as Rufus continued his long-winded anecdote. He noted the time difference between Balamb and distant Deling. _This isn't live_, _couldn't we fast forward?_

"â€”Seed, being an organization obsolete in times of peace, must therefore perpetuate this terrible bloodshed if it is to keep its place in our world. Seed, being the enemy of peace, threatens the cornerstone of peace, our unity, by their acts of terrorism in Timber, in conjunction with the local extremist faction known as 'Forest Owls'. It is well known and documented that Commander Leonhart himself keeps the company of Rinoa Heartilly, known to be both a sorceress and the leader of this factionâ€”strange bedfellows to say the least."

"Is this guy for real?" Irvine's voice boomed over the television. "Rufus: half politician, half comedian, all man!"

"â€”Decisive action must be taken if we are to stop them from causing irreparable damage, and not just to Galbadia, mind youâ€”"

"Pay attention," Said Quistis. "He's just getting to the important part."

"I mean seriously," He continued, ignoring her. "Can't the guy just pick _one_ _day_ job? It's that kind of indecisiveness that put their screwed-up nation where it is—"

"Irvine!"

"Hey hey hey!" He protested, then said no more, but tipped his hat down to cover his face. Rediscovering it absence, he ran a flustered hand through his hair, and smiling jerkily, put his feet up and reclined so violently as to nearly fall. Only the television humored his efforts to disappear.

"Already, my plans are producing results." Rufus continued, Squall looking ever more skeptical. "You'll recall the happenings in Timber of lateâ€”they are at an end!" Palpable waves of astonishment swept silently through the briefing room as Rufus' audience gasped and cheered on the television. Irvine lost it, and with a backwards heave, fell off his chair.

"How the-?"

"A detachment of Army Special Forces stormed the building early this morning, apprehending the Forest Owl terrorists and one of their Seed compatriots. While I'm not at liberty to discuss the unit's actions in great detail, be assured, my friends, there was not one hostage fatality. All Galbadia can rest assured that these men have been reunited with their families and-"

Xu stopped the recording. "And the perpetrators are to be executed today in Deling, 1900 Galbadia time. Publicly, too, Rufus' orders." She said.

"What the-?" Irvine stuttered. "No one's even voted yet!"

"Well, the general consensus being that he's got the election already in the bag, he decided that he'd get a head start on intimidation of the populace."

"Bullshit!" He declared. "We'll get 'em out! It's what, 1020 Balamb? Compared to 1900 Deling, two hours ahead—we've got roughly six and a half hours for a rescue op. I might even get a shot at Ru-"

"This is a trap." Squall stated coldly.

"Aw c'mon!" Irvine pleaded. "You're not gonna let 'em die!" His gaze darted frantically from face to face, rummaging through the room in search of support—nothing.

"Well—"

"The Commander's only proper course of action is to minimize our losses as best he can." Quistis said flatly.

"Rufus himself said he was going after Seed's hierarchy," Xu added. "Squall in particular. And Rinoa." Even a dejected Selphie had to concede that this was a textbook example of bait. Irvine was looking increasingly exasperated.

"Fuck this! —I mean," He pleaded. "I can see why'd you be worried about causing a big scene, collateral casualties and the whole bit, but that's why they have sharpshooters in the first place!" Squall sighed and began to make his way towards the exit.

"Hey! Where're ya goin'? We have to-"

"Do whatever you want." The door slid closed behind him, and footsteps could be heard down the tiled hallway, followed by the hum of the lift.

"Maybe I will." Irvine suggested defiantly. But he knew even then that such a gesture was nothing more, and a rescue attempt would be viewed the same at best, that is, if not frowned upon as suicide more often is. The bottom line, at any rate: Zell's dead.

Nonetheless, he remembered something Rufus, of all people, had said. And while he'd never possessed an appreciation for the finer points of political rhetoric, there was something.

"The blood of the martyrsâ€¦"

* *

Squall needed to think, which meant he needed to be left alone. He exited the elevator with urgency such that his right shoulder caught on the left door, the hydraulics struggling to make way. He cursed quietly and continued toward the one place they would never look for him.

He entered the cafeteria at a brisk walk, with the occasional backward glance to ensure that he was not being followed. He was not. Choosing a lonely table in the far corner, he sat stooped and considered the events of this and the previous day.

An hour passed, and still he could not make sense of anything. A keen awareness of this fact only served to further frustrate him. He was a soldier, and had been a soldier as far into the past as he could clearly remember. An exceptional soldier, particularly an exceptional Seed, should have been able to break this fiasco down, and sort out the constituents as easily as a grunt shoots the black, not the white or vice versa. _But if theâ€¦_

"Aaaghh!" Twin fists thudded against the thankfully sturdy table, and Squall looked up, his gaze almost rabidly intense. _Not "but", black and white!_

His eyes wandered aimlessly, not seeking inspiration, rather perpetuating a form of procrastination that might be mistaken for genuine mental activity. Then, in the large marble flowerpot of sorts occupying the center of the cafeteria, something caught his eye. Etched in the stone: _The measure of great men is the welfare of the common man._

"Hmâ€¦" _Reminds me of all the things Headmaster Kramer used to say_â€¦_no wonder really._ The thought lasted only a microsecond before giving way to one more constructive. _The common manâ€¦_

_

â€¦ These are just GI's, not trained to handle such incidents, and so Rufus made a request for Seed intervention at 2230 hoursâ€¦"

_ "A detachment of Army Special Forces stormed the buildingâ€¦"_

Faster even than enlightenment had come, he scrambled to his feet and was gone.

* *

When Squall burst again onto the bridge, he found his companions to have withdrawn into a quieter, more thoughtful state, and startled them from it in the process. Irvine was so taken by surprise that he fell backwards in his chair. He pulled himself up after a moment.

"Wow, this really isn't my day." He joked, dusting off his coat. "So, what brings you back in such a hurry?"

"This mission has been a trap since the beginning." Squall announced.

"Rufus commissioned Seed under the pretense that specialist troops were not otherwise availableâ€|"

"But," Quistis continued for him. "In last night's announcement, the Senator makes reference to Army Special Forces. You're right, Squall. I wouldn't be surprised to find that he'd a hand in the Forest Owl's actions to begin with, either."

"What?" Rinoa interjected. "Zone would never make a deal with the likes of him!"

"No, never, but he might've been leaked some misinformation." Squall reminded her, as gently as possible.

"Yeah, I understand that y'all took the bait when Deling was supposedly comin' to town by rail." Quistis then made an attempt to redirect the conversation to its original course.

"Irvine shut up."

"Hey hey hey!"

"Irvine, shut up." Xu seconded. "You're still only a cadet, so stay in line."

"Yeah? So how d'ya intend to bust me down at all, s'posing I go and do somethin' in Deling tonight?"

"What good would it doâ€|" Squall muttered.

"Huh?" Irvine turned to face him, and was faced gravely, a new manner seeming to come over the commander.

"How could you possibly stop this now? What do expect one trainee, up against a better portion of the entire G-army, could doâ€|"maybe wreak some havocâ€|"take a few with you? That's neither a Seed nor a rebel."

"That's a terrorist." Quistis said.

"Aww c'mon! I don't operate like-"

"It doesn't matter. All that matters now is how they'd speak of you in the past tenseâ€|"a lone, crazed gunman, who tried to prevent his crazed terrorist comrades from being brought to justice."

"You'll make Rufus right," Quistis urged. "And Zone, Wattsâ€|_Zell_ will have died in vain."

"â€|Fine."

"Thank you."

Through the course of this conversation, Squall had noticed but been unable to address, Rinoa's increasingly sullen demeanor. Though some infallible status quo of her being had it that she mask sorrow with stillness, even he knew better. Approaching and kneeling before her, his height and her drooped posture brought their eyes perfectly level; each read the other's.

Rinoa nodded slightly, and Squall knew she understood. Then, placing his hands on her shoulders, his grasp tighter than intended, even possessive, he brought them to their feet. He sighed a heavy, burdened sigh, seeming then that he would flash a sad smile, but instead drew her onto her toes and beyond; and as she parted with the ground, they kissed. And the instant she again touched the floor, he was gone.

"What the- what just-?" Irvine stammered. "Where the hell's he off to now?"

Rinoa knew.

"Timber."

* *

She cornered Squall in the garage, finding him standing by the open door of one of the smaller cars. He reached in and turned the ignition, oblivious to her; Rinoa cleared her throat in an exaggerated fashion.

"I have no time to discuss this." He said curtly, ducking his head out of the window, apparently interrupted in the process. In truth, he had spent the last five starting and stopping, blowing the horn in sporadic, supposedly accidental bursts, and otherwise making as much (hopefully) unsuspicious noise as possible.

"Ahh, I see. Ignition trouble?" She cocked an eyebrow, eyeing him quizzically.

"I'll have you know that it's the _drive_ _shaft_." He replied, following suit.

"Whatever."

"Whatever."

"So," She continued. "Where _are_ you going anyway?"

"Deling City."

"What?" She demanded, her voice cracking from abrupt intensity and outrage. "How can you-"

"Shhh," He raised a finger to her lips. "I've neither the time nor the means to explain now. When this is overâ€¦" He did not finish, opting instead for a moment of intimate eye contact before he jumped into the driver's seat.

"Not so fast, Squall Leonhart. You're not getting rid of me now."

"Rinoa, no." He said flatly. "I hate to put my foot down like this, but it's for her-"

"Squall, yes." The locks clicked into position, but before he could reach to close his own door, she moved through it and, proceeding to stretch herself across his lap in a most obstructive fashion. Sighing, he unlocked the passenger door.

"Go around and get in." He conceded. _Hyne!_ _Why would I even be doing this in the first place, if it weren't-_

"You go around. _I'm_ driving."

He did not answer.

"Just kidding!" She laughed uneasily, as if to emphasize her point, but failing in the attempt, and stepped back outside the vehicle. Squall reached across the passenger seat and opened the door for her, gesturing for her to get in. She made a faceâ€”_Me? _

He noddedâ€”_you. _

Be that way, her expression said as she climbed in.

He nodded again.

"I love you too." Rinoa sniffed, but quickly softened. "I love you, even if you don't have a motorcycle." He rolled his eyes.

"Those things are dangerous and impractical."

"Fine, if you don't want a girl hanging on your backâ€”fine, fine. Who'm I to complain?" Squall could be heard to mutter something as he twisted the ignition key, but as intended, his words could not be discerned over the roar of the engine.

"What?"

"Nothing."

* *

Zell heaved himself from sleep screaming and gurgling, hacking up the blood that poured down his throat and choked him. He was immediately restrained and slammed flat against what he guessed was either a rough cot or operating table. As his eyes adjusted to the intense light, he counted four men holding him down, and another, who clawed at a bloodied and torn latex glove.

"Fuck! He fuckin' bit me!" He hollered, tearing off the glove. Grimacing, he examined the wound and dashed some peroxide over it. "Ahhh, ahhh, haahhhh. It fuckin' burns!" He looked across the table to an apparent sixth. "Dammit Wedge, I told you to put 'im out cold!" _Wedge?_

"Quit the bitching," Came Wedge's reply. "C'mon, how bad can getting your tongue cut off be?" The surgeon brandished his scalpel menacingly.

"Pretty damn bad, I'll wager. Wanna find out?"

"Alright chill! Sorry I can't be Covert Ops and a frickin' anesthesiologist."

"Yeah I know. Who'm I to think one of you goddamn spies might be good for something more?"

"I just told you: it's Covert Operations. Spies are the little maniacs who run around in ski masks and body suits with cyanide needles stuck under their fingernails."

"Even Covert Operations is supposed to know how to fill up a goddamn needle!" He retorted, with much sarcastic emphasis on 'Covert Operations'. "It's in Manual X-13, first goddamn paragraph" in case you dropped outta sixth grade. And believe me, I would not be surprised. I swear, if I get fuckin' tetanus-" He was interrupted by a tap on the shoulder from one of the orderlies. "What?"

"Uhh Doc, I think ya need to do something about all this blood." The orderly lifted Zell's head slightly, emphasizing his point.

"Just turn him on his side and shove some gauze in his mouth, that'll hold him. He's gonna die in a few hours anyway. And call Dr. Scala if anything happens. I'm gonna get this looked at, then I'll be taking the rest of the day off." He walked to the exit, nursing his wounded hand, then turned once more. "Oh yeah, Secret Agent Man, make sure you put buddy boy back asleep."

"Bastard" Wedge muttered, beginning to tinker with the IV in Zell's arm.

The SeeD began to thrash about, fighting as best he could against the sedatives feeding into his blood and the able-bodied attendants. His lips moved and he gurgled wordlessly, but his eyes were wide and full of accusation. But shortly his eyelids grew heavy and his gaze wavered.

"Shhh, shhh." Wedge whispered. "You'll be feeling better in no time" in a few hours anyway."

Note: This took me long enough, no? Anyway, the next part shall be the last, that I can assure you, dear reader. I've been working on this same piece (not this part, mind you, though it may seem that way) for nearly a year now, and I really think it's high time I show something for it. Also, I have to say I wrote this section under the influence of a few, more famous works, being primarily Edward Hawker's The Code of Rebellion (you'll see why in the next part, if not already) and just some random quotes I've picked up in History classes" all about the tree of liberty being watered with the blood of revolutionaries and such, though not exactly. Now I really should save all acknowledgements until the end, so just bear with me until then if you think you might see your name, okay?

7. Default Chapter Title

Oak Trees and Angel Wings

Oak Trees and Angel Wings

Part VII

David James Johnston

"Ahem, pardon the question, dear, ummm," Rinoa began, sounding politely uncertain. "But didn't we just pass the Ragnarok?"

"Yes." Squall replied. His eyes remained fixed forward as they continued down the road to Balamb.

"Well then c'mon, about face!"

He ignored her.

"Oh, what is this?" She said, mildly incensed. "Do you think it at all possible that maybe, just maybe, you made a _mistake_?"

"Rinoa, please understand-"

" 'Please understand that we men are automotively infallible. And wordily, to coin _two_ terms.'" She mocked. "Did I ever tell you you're as bad as Caraway?"

Exhaling conspicuously, he stared, expressionless, at the road. "Several times."

She sighed. "Alright, we both know you're sensible enough to put sense ahead of pride. So just-"

"I know what I'm doing."

"Okay okay! I know. You're the SeeD. You probably just want to avoid making a scene with your big loud rocket ship, am I right?"

"Yes."

"Well I'm satisfied." She said in conclusion. "You know, it would've been a lot easier to just _tell_ me that. In the beginning."

"Sorry."

"Oh I'm not angry with you. It's just a little point of etiquette, dear, to answer people's questions."

"I think my table manners are sufficient."

Rinoa appeared to have begun ignoring him. "Ahh," She emitted a fluttery sigh, hands clasped across her chest. "I remember the night when I first saw you. I remember your uniformâ€"you really should wear that more often, Garden knows how to dress a guy; I remember your hairâ€" She reached over to further rumple the perpetually tousled locks, but he shook her hand away. "And your scar, and your bright, smoldering eyesâ€"rugged, yet refined, like someone had taken a big sexy jungle man and dressed him up."

He blushed. "Whateverâ€"|"

She continued to ignore him. "I remember how we danced. You were wonderful."

"Sure, whateverâ€"|"

"No really!" She insisted. "You don't find dances with the technical caliber of a Viennese Waltz at Choco Billy's Hoe-Down."

His face was a throbbing pink, but he could not resist a smile.

"And I remember your strong hands, and how safe and secure I felt when they held me. And yet how delicately they held that goblet of champagne!" She now returned to her previous tone. "By the stem."

Squall frowned. "So?"

"You never hold the goblet, or wine glass or whatever you care to call it, by the stem! Seriously, Squall, one of these days I'm going to have to introduce you to my dad. And if you thought the starched uniforms and white gloves marked the extent of his old fashioned sensibilities"not to mention that I forbidden from even dating until I was 16"well, try sitting down to dinner with him. If you so much as take my coat wrong!" She ran a finger across her throat.

"I'll keep it in mind."

"That is, unless you wanna just run off together."

He shrugged, his face similarly listless.

"That's my Squall."

Easing the car to a halt, he unlocked the doors and gestured for her to disembark. She exited and he followed, locking the doors behind them. Presently, they made their way to the docks of Balamb town.

Squall produced a small device resembling a remote control, studied it for a moment, then entered a code and drew back from the pier.

"Rinoa," He offered. "You may want to stand back."

Abruptly, the calm surface at the water's edge began to bubble with increasing severity, soon becoming a veritable geyser. A last, triumphant jet of water issued forth from the sea, and as it fell, revealed a submarine"along with its two pending occupants, both sopping wet.

"Thanks for the warning." Rinoa said dryly, wringing out her hair.

"Sorry."

"Dive, dive!" Came a third voice. "Wow, pretty snazzy, I guess Commander has its perks too. Say, that an Aston Martin?"

"Seifer." Squall very nearly growled.

"Squall ol' buddy!" Seifer beamed. "Ahoy!"

"What do you want, Seifer?" Rinoa said.

"Well, I was hoping to catch up on old times. But as it appears that you still like it quick and dirty-"

"What?" She repeated.

He inhaled slowly, composing himself, and then faced her gravely. "Rufus' henchmen murdered my father and brothers as they slept; they ravaged my mother and sisters until their bodies gave out, then left them for dead where they had slept, and put the house—the entire town—to torch. Now, I am all that remains. And I intend to restore the honor of House Almasy and uphold the way of the Fire Cross. Woe to the god who seeks to bar my way!"

"I think I'll borrow a phrase." Rinoa replied. "—"

"Very well then—the truth." He paused, checked the area, and, assured that no one was listening, continued. "I am bored beyond mortal comprehension. And it is a maddening boredom, thanks in no small part to that lovely specimen we know as Fujin, who, at her therapist's behest, goes about declaring 'I. LOVE. PEOPLE.' Day and night. I will never learn to fish, least of all from Raijin, yet I've nothing better to do than sit on that same goddamned pier endless hours while my gunblade rusts. I want some action."

"You could try writing Rufus some speeches." She suggested.

"Don't pretend you don't know what I mean. I know it's short notice, but I was just sitting in the bar over there listening to Raijin lecture me on the intricacies of bait when who should appear but Mr. Man of the Hour and his mistress, off on a leisurely cruise, no doubt. But I hear Galbadia's been unseasonably inclement of late. Very much so. So I figured you could probably use another hand on deck."

"Yeah? Like we're really—"

"You're right." Squall interrupted. "You're expendable and you've taken the graduation exam enough times that you should be able to operate this LC with your eyes closed."

"Wha-? Squall, are you—"

"Apparently, he is not. What, you think he's gonna save the world with no one but you to back him up? Don't make me laugh." He grinned suddenly. "Besides, who doesn't love it when two old nemeses team up to stop the real baddie? It's classic."

"Just get in the LC." Squall instructed. Seifer saluted and bounded across the gangway and ducked through the door. But Rinoa was slower to comply.

"Squall," She said, her voice low and not without accusation. "I know what you're planning, thinking you'll get away with it. And it's not gonna happen."

"I know you can take care of yourself, Rinoa. But this way I—"

"Can ditch me somewhere and still have someone watching your back? Because really can you think of anyone you trust less than Seifer Almasy?"

"Me."

"What?"

"How many times were you in a coma before you met me?"

"How long d'ya think it would've been before I took a bullet from one of Caraway's goons? Or taken away by those 'Special Forces' Rufus spoke so highly of, just disappeared?" She quivered, accentuating the fact that all she said was true. "I'd be in Deling, hanging in the Palace Square with Zone and Watts and--"

"P-lease! Get a room!" Seifer quipped from within the LC. Squall had failed to notice the hand with which he stroked her hair and periodically ran down her back. He blushed.

"Why don't you take a picture?" Rinoa suggested, more annoyed than embarrassed.

"Well who says I won't?" He threatened. "But first don't we have some stuff to do" in Deling or something, right?"

She did not look at Seifer as she made her way into the LC, but he smirked, as if thinking she entered at his behest. Before she stepped off the threshold of the dock, she turned back to Squall and promised, rather cryptically:

"We'll save that for later." Shaking his head at Rinoa's giggling and Seifer's boisterous belch of laughter, Squall tromped across the gangway.

"Set sail!" Seifer declared. "Yo-ho, yo-ho" to wherever the winds may blow us!" Rinoa shook her head.

"Whaaat?"

"Get a life, Seifer."

Â. *

"Tell me, Lavinius, how goes the trial of those undesirables?" Rufus was uncharacteristically relaxed, allowing himself to sink into the plush leather of his chair.

"Well sir, the defendants' testimony is, if I may say so, rather unconvincing. Their representation has some crazy excuse" they had their tongues cut out or something. But the judge isn't buying it."

"Crude but" whatever works. I trust you've arranged the accommodations for tonight's little function?"

"Absolutely, sir. You'll be presiding over the execution after dinner" speaking of which, where shall I make reservations for you?"

"Oh, I trust your judgment."

"Very good, sir. Now, as I was saying" "

While Lavinius continued to brief him, he took a long draw of the celebratory cigar he had allowed himself, and listened with lacking

intention. After tonight, the plotting and politicking and would be over. After tonight, the phony spectacle would hardly be necessary. Declaring himself Emperor would not so much as diminish the ardor with which they chanted his name. And why _should_ they interrupt worship of their fearless leader merely to ascertain the nature of the honey that poured from his mouth with every word? _Why indeed_.

"Excuse me, umm, sir? How did you say you wanted your Wendigo done?"

"Beg pardon?"

"Ahem, your Wendigo"how do you like it?"

"Oh, yes of course. Medium rare, please."

"Very good, sir. Will that be all?"

"Just insure that I've a suit for dinner."

"Don't dig the military authoritarian look for a night on the town?"

Rufus laughed, bellowing a cloud of smoke into Lavinius' coughing face.

"That's a good one. And all this time, I thought you were just a robot."

"Oh, you should see me with the misses"well I am kinda a machine, if you take my meaning."

"Ha! Ha! No I think I'll leave it up to your kids to walk in on _that_. Dismissed."

"Heh, heh. Thank you, sir."

"I _so_ long to abolish casual Fridays" He muttered, the door clicking shut behind his adjutant. Extinguishing the stubby remnant of his cigar, he contemplated the coming evening. He ran his tongue across the grime on his teeth, and a hand over the newly sprung stubble on his chin. It had been a long two days. _I really ought to get cleaned up_, he thought, rubbing his thumb and forefinger together and concentrating on the greasy sensations they produced. _Truly filthy._

Â. *

The landing craft dropped its anchor half a kilometer off the northern coast of Galbadia, near Deling City. Seifer, lacking any better occupation, was at the helm (above deck at his own behest, for the sake of emphasizing his intention to give the two passengers privacy)"and regretting it as another breeze came up and saturated him with a frigid spray. Bored and shivering, he knocked on the hatch and called down:

"You guys done yet? It's getting pretty cold and lonely for me up here and, well, Squall I think you're better acclimated for this than I am. I mean I failed the SeeD exam at least three times and I think

I was driving at least one of those timesâ€|until I passed out anyway."

"What is it you wanted?" Squall inquired.

"Your womanâ€|no, really, uhh, I stopped us 500 meters from the beach, as you instructed."

"Thanks," Squall said. He opened a locker opposite the briefing monitor, and indicated several wetsuits of the standard flat black and emblazoned with a small SeeD logo. "Suit up." He stripped off his jacket, and then began unlacing his boots. Then stopping abruptly, he faced Rinoa, blushing. "Oh, uh, would you mind changing behind the monitor, by the main doors?"

"Oh come, Squall." Seifer derided. "It's nothing none of us have never seen before."

"Then you can use that movie theatre in your head." Rinoa said curtly, taking a suit and stepping behind the bulkhead that housed the screen. "Or what's it called, your wildest imagination?"

"TouchÃ©."

Squall, already finished with his changing, returned to the locker and removed three black vest/backpack hybrids. He inspected each one, making sure of the presence of several indispensable items: breathing mask and O2 tanks; a diver's knife, readily accessible from the waist strap, a .45 caliber SeeD sidearm; ammunition; flashlight, lithium flares, and night vision goggles; flare gun; thirty meters of cable, along with a grappling hook and other assorted climbing tools; photo chromatic sunglasses, to shield the eyes from a pair of incandescent photon flash bang grenades; two concussion grenades; a gas grenade filled with nitrous oxide, another with nerve gas, and a third that would dispense black smoke. _Useless_, he realized, _but no one ever died of following regulations._

"Ooh, what's this?" Seifer asked, apparently having already dismantled his carefully packed equipment set. "Mmm, pillly pillly, come to papa my little, uhhâ€|what is this, morphine? Ex maybe? You know, methylendioxysomethingwhoozitamine."

Rinoa was incredulous: "What the hell?"

"I dunno," Squall replied, not bothering to look as he sorted through the third pack. "What color is it?"

"Red and white."

"Cyanide, in case of capture and interrogation."

"Sure. I think I should do better to put this away before--"

"Before you get my hopes up?" Rinoa offered.

"It's a wonderful feeling, being loved by someone. Really it is."

"Get your mask on," Squall ordered, his pack checked and fastened

securely. "And get above deck. When the submerge sequence begins, just swim away. There's a sewage outlet not far from here, through which we'll gain entrance into the city."

"No airlock? Sheesh, talk about yer tight budgets. Waitâ€"sewage? Aww, c'mon! Ooohh, what's all this?"

"Unless you want to be sealed below, don't mind whatever shiny objects or whatever else it is that's so fascinating in the equipment locker."

"I was just looking for some extra life vests so I could float Hyperion to shore with us. I don't wanna just swim with it on my back."

"Forget it. This isn't an all-out assault. Try and think low-profile."

"I can't help it. Why do you think I keep failing those exams?"

"Ten secondsâ€|"

"Seriously, it pains me to say it but I don't excel as you do at scholastic pursuits, which, if I daresay, have no practical application in the world at largeâ€"not to diminish-

"â€|Nine, eightâ€|"

"Alright alright!"

"Okay!" Squall shouted, hustling him to the ladder. "Go go go! Haul ass!" He followed up the ladder on Seifer's heels.

Rinoa began strapping on her own pack to shouts of "Jump! Dive!" and the subsequent splash. Squall dropped back down the ladder.

"The Commander is supposed to be the last overboard." He explained, emphasizing the 'supposed'.

"I see." She said, moving towards the exit ladder.

"Wait," He croaked suddenly, grabbing her by the wrist.

"Umm does 'submerge sequence' ring a bell?" She tried to pull away.

"I was just getting Seifer out." Awkwardly, he winked and smiled.

"Hehe, I get it. Soâ€|"

"I'm not a belligerent, suicidal fool, Rinoa."

"Obviously."

"The point is: I'm doing this for you."

In spite of her confusion, she ventured a joke: "Well, I should think you ought to. Whom else?"

"Who else is there?"

She sighed. "Look, Squall, if you wanna practice pick-up lines you don't have to be so weird about it. But, and forgive me if I'm being presumptuous, you being Commander and all, but isn't your timing-"

He silenced her with an index finger over her lips, cupping her chin in his palm, parted them, and kissed her full on the mouth. Surprised, and slightly annoyed, she was nonetheless willing to play alongâ€”for a time. Abruptly, she pulled away.

"Yuck! What the hell are you doing?" She spat a measure of unnaturally colored, and apparently tasting, liquid onto the floor.

"You'll understand." He said, taking something from his jacket and pressing it between his thumb and forefinger.

"No no no, _you _do not-"

Squall covered her mouth and nose forcefully, and held in spite of her squealing and squirming. After a minute, her eyelids fell shut and she slumped into his arms, unconscious. He closed the container of Sleep Powder tablets and brushed the crushed powder off his hand, then produced a syringe of the same liquid and injected her thigh. He counted the CC'sâ€”_five, an hour; ten, two; fifteen, three; twenty, fourâ€”|50 cubic centimetersâ€”_not a strong anesthetic, the whole mouth-to-bit had been barely enough to knock her out for fifteen minutes. But he didn't trust himself with much of anything stronger.

Walking over to the control console, he engaged the auto-navigation system, and then hurried up the ladder and overboard as the boat oriented itself. He dove into the frigid waters just as the engines engaged and the LC sped off towards Fisherman's Horizonâ€”_no one would look there._

"Leonhart, you sonuvabitch! 'Ooh, hurry overboard before we submerge'." Seifer mocked. "That was a helluva quickie, and to think you had all that time I was freezing my ass off at the helm. But who needs the cold ocean breeze when you can just jump in and get your hypothermia on in earnest?"

"The wetsuit would keep you warm if you were swimming ashore. Or at least staying deeper so no one shoots you dead in the water."

"Hey I got an idea. I'll race you to the beach."

"I don't see how you can cheat at this one. Get your breath mask on, stay ten feet under and move. You should find the sewer access without much trouble."

"Got itâ€”oh yeah, and Squall," He began.

"What?"

"That flesh tone suits your complexion quite nicely, but it's a bit smudged. Are you sure it's waterproof?"

Squall started wiping the lipstick off his face, mumbling with a marked lack of enthusiasm, "That's pretty funnyâ€|"

"Not so easy administering it to 'em orally, is it? Looks oh-so easy in the movies, no?"

"I don't know what kinda movies you've been watching."

"Yeah I figured you wouldn't be interested in 'em anyways. Bye!" Seifer performed a surface dive and by the time Squall finished removing the makeup, his rival was gone. He in turn vanished beneath the surface and the tide consumed the ripples that had marked his presence.

Â. *

General Horatio Augustus Caraway looked out on the pre-execution festivities and shook his head wearily. He closed the curtains, collapsed back in his chair, and poured a meager measure of scotch. _Empty_. _Damn, and I'd only just opened it_. Grumbling, he stood again and stumbled over to the redwood cabinet, picturesquely situated beneath the head of a Mesmerize and some plaques commemorating his service to Galbadia in various wars. One hung severely crooked. It had been mounted just that night, and awarded to him by President Loire before he'd left Esthar. He turned the keyâ€"he just left it in the hole now, so he wouldn't have to bother with finding it (or trying to hit the keyhole when the room was swimming); there was only one bottle left. _â€|Guess I haven't restocked in awhileâ€|oh well_. _Champagne was not ideally suited to he present state of mind, but the vintage was good and it would suffice. He popped the cork, showering the contents of his desk with foam.

"Dammit!" He cursed, groping for a cloth to wipe it off before it soaked into the mahogany, and in the process knocking off several items, including the champagne. It did not break, but the thick end smashed the face of a small frame. "Ahh goddammit!" It was a picture of Caraway, his wife Julia, and their newborn daughter, and already the liquid was taking its toll on the photograph. Too late, he seized it from the wrecked frame and spilled champagne and attempted to clean it. Leaving it on the desk, he hurled the bottle against the wall and shattered it, then sat, resting his head on the desk and panting.

He was preparing to call the maid when abruptly he noticed the fragmented bottleneck. It lay by the wall, adorned with bows of black and blue silk. "Oh, hellâ€|oh, damn it all to hellâ€|W-we, Julia and Iâ€|that wasâ€|" He stuttered, seeming to address the child in the ruined photo. â€|_For your eighteenth birthday, bottled it the day you were born. _"Of course your mother wasn't around on the occasion." _Neither were you_.

Suddenly, there came a tapping from behind the sculpture marking then entrance to one of his mansion's numerous secret corridors. He frowned suspiciously, producing a revolver and retrieving a wineglass, then placing the latter in the statue's hand. The passage opened, bringing into view Squall Leonhart and Seifer Almay. Leonhart forgot the wires he had been tampering with and raised his hands; Almay merely displayed his empty palms.

"What the hell do you want?" Caraway demanded.

"To stop Rufus." Leonhart said.

"Get in here." Caraway ordered, gesturing with his pistol. He stepped aside for Leonhart, but grabbed Almas by the shoulder as he passed, turning forcefully to face him.

"Oh, howdy Mr. C." Almas said, genuine fear permeating the light-hearted greeting. Caraway glowered at him, red-eyed and shaking with intensity. "Uhh, how's your daughter been?"

Caraway punched him in the gut, hard.

"Aaaaooooooooow!" Almas howled, stooping and clutching his stomach.

"Wrong question." He whispered.

"Ow! Honestly, what's a body to do when she says she swears that she's eight-?" Almas was interrupted by his own terrified squeak as Caraway drew a bead on him. Revolver quivering in his grip, glaring feverishly, he announced:

"I am drunk."

"I take your meaning."

"I'm glad. Now, what do you want?"

"I need you to provide us access to the Presidential Palace." Squall said.

"I'm afraid that's not my department. See, what you really need to do is kill a few people and fool some others into voting for you."

"Which is your department?" Seifer inquired.

"I have no such ambitions, butâ€¦" Caraway gestured with his revolver, thumbing the hammer. "I never did like people who ask obvious questions."

"I'm guessing you're not a speechwriter."

"You wanna prize for that?"

"Just get us into the Palaceâ€¦please." Leonhart, impatient but far from pleading, instructed.

"Look, I've no love for Rufus, but if you think I'm going to participate in a coup staged by a pair of pubescent boys, you've got another thing coming. Hell, if I had to guess, I'd say you're doing this because you got my daughter pregnant and she's developed an unusual and insatiable appetite for pickled ice cream. But you're all out of that now, aren't you? But political upheaval is never in short-"

"_You _look, pops." Almas interrupted. "Firstly, Squall didn't do anything with your daughter. I can pretty much guarantee that."

Secondly, even if he did, d'ya think anyone with pants that tight would have a double-digit sperm count? Just get us into the Palaceâ€¦please."

"It's not our intention to kill anyone." Squall added.

"â€¦Fine. You can pose as my bodyguards. One momentâ€¦" Caraway touched his intercom. "Guards, report to my office at once. There's been a disturbance."

Momentarily, the door was flung open, revealing a pair of G-army regulars. "General, what is it, sir?" One asked.

The hammer clicked back.

"â€¦eep."

Â. *

Rinoa woke, then drifted asleep, then again, and finally willed herself to remain conscious. She inhaled and heaved, rolling off the bench and onto the floor in a heap of wrinkled clothing, disheveled hair, and general drug-induced grogginess. Standing, she groaned, stretched, combed a hand through her hair to clear it from her face, and rubbed her eyes. She surveyed her surroundings, concluding her location to be that which she most expected and least desiredâ€¦if she was dizzy or disoriented, it was likely not from any chemicalsâ€¦_I'm just seasick_.

"Dammit Squall," She muttered, checking the clock: _1736; ground zero at 1900_. "I'll catch you yet, and then I'll make an extra special effort to get in your way, meanie." She joked halfheartedly, admitting silently that, if her understanding of Squall's intentions was at all accurate, any interference could be fatal. Such a contingency, by her reckoning, already spanned an uncomfortable distance into the realm of possibility. _Yeah, _she reaffirmed, _I'd only be getting in the way, just that._

"No! That's what you want me to think. 'Fighting is the man's job, dearest. Run along and use your Hyne-like omnipotence to make me some pie and raise the children while I'm out bowling and drinking with the guys.' Forgetting who's got the god-like powers, no, dear?" Illustrating her point, her eyes flared and her hair stood on end as a crackle of magic energy surged through her body before diffusing through her fingers.

"Yeah," She added, wiping a trickle of saliva and a thicker, bitter fluid from the corner of her mouth. "You're a sloppy kisser too. There's at least as much of thisâ€¦serum on me as in meâ€¦" _Nothing to do now but head home and pray, anywayâ€¦_ She began to rifle through the storage lockers in search of the operator's manual or, failing that, inspiration. Finding neither, she threw her hands up in resigned exasperation.

"That's it!" She announced. "Noâ€¦_no_!" A thick, official-looking booklet by the helm caught her eye. "â€¦yes."

Â. *****

"I have a serious wedgie." Seifer Almasy complained. They had

negotiated the crowds that swelled increasingly around the Presidential Palace, anticipating the night's grim spectacle, and now had a moment of pause while Caraway presented his security clearance to a pair of Presidential Guards. In truth, Squall Leonhart neither neededâ€"for even the most drunken of revelers dared not to obstruct an official of Caraway's prestigeâ€" wanted, nor could have by any means induced himself to rest, such was his resolve. And when he was, so often he was serious, he was irritable, a fact of which Almasy was keenly aware. "These fatigues are too tightâ€"that, or it's just that my boxers are so spacious, say no more."

"Good idea." Leonhart muttered.

"No, I'm serious. It's a widely recognized fact that modern combat demands mobility. You know, the G-army sorely needs to adopt a policy of function before form."

"Yeah." He agreed in exaggerated tones. "They can start by all putting red crosses on their sleeves, no doubt to fool the enemy into mistaking them for medics. And they can carry swords because, as anyone knows, you can't be shot dead at one hundred meters if you've got fifty pounds of steel in your hands."

"I detect a hint of sarcasm."

"Believe me, you are a paradigm of utilitarianism."

"Okay, look: some prefer vocabulary, but others stick with the sword. And everyone's happy as long as it stays that way. Ha-apy." He smiled like a mental patient.

"â€" "

"What?"

"Focus."

"At least no one three feet away's going to be able to grab me by my hairâ€" Almasy harrumphed, but was unable to provoke a response. His formulation of a riposte to nothing was interrupted by the stiff click of boot heels against concrete. The two about-faced to see Caraway marching through the gate and into ground zero. Double-timing as discreetly as possible, they joined him midway across the well-kept lawn.

What grass there had been in the small parks of Deling City had disappeared when the DC Park Authority had decided that it ought to be replaced with small, decorative trees in two square meters of soil, surrounded by simple mosaics of large, squared stones of comparable area. For such a simple pleasure to be such a commodity, so much so to be reserved exclusively for the single ruler, was indicative of the succession of tyrants that might soon be halted. He had come merely to help a friend, not to spark a revolution. But his friend might well die regardless. This way, it might at least be leant meaning.

They stopped in front of a hulking, double-door gate to which a portcullis would have strongly lent itself. From within there emanated some vaguely familiar musicâ€"familiar, or merely, in Squall's case, to have heard one waltz was to have heard them all. If

nothing else, the melody brought to mind better memories than did the wizened mahogany of the doors. Caraway nodded to the Presidential Guards, who in turn acknowledged him, then proceeded to open the gate to the scene of a huge, ornate banquet hall that was currently accommodating what was presumably a gala for the upper crust of Rufus' campaign donors. The music was immediately amplified and Squall realized that he did not recognize the tune.

He and Seifer entered on Caraway's flanks, stopping several paces into the room for Caraway to shrug off his cloak. Behind them, the doors slammed shut and Squall experienced a familiar sensation of being trapped, unable to turn back, but under circumstances less pleasant than those of the incident he recalled. Seifer took the cloak, and Caraway pointed to a marble staircase opposite the doors, which forked halfway up into two smaller staircases.

"Coat Check," He said, indicating the left. "Rufus." He pointed to the right. "From here on, you're on your own."

"Roger that." Seifer confirmed.

"Thanks." Squall said. He had started across the red and gilded carpet when Caraway caught his arm.

"And Leonhart," Caraway said. "Try and keep in mind that you mean more to my daughter than a handful of punks and rebels."

He nodded and continued toward the stairs.

"Ah, Horatio," A man whom he vaguely recognized greeted. "My dear Horatio, won't you have a glass of chardonnay with me?"

"I'm already drunk." Caraway replied.

"Ah-ha, ha! I see that you haven't yet lost your edge to age, no? Come, come! I insist. Oh and yes! Have I introduced you to my new wife?"

As the man continued, Caraway took the glass offered him and immediately drained it. He bowed and kissed the hand of a woman who looked to be thirty years her escort's junior, privately observing that, while it had been a long day, it would only get longer.

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"Sir? Sir!" Lavinius whispered as loudly as inconspicuously possible as his boss continued his address.

"I will give Galbadia back to the people!" Rufus continued, ignoring him. "It is the duty of the government to serve the people! Rufus swears to you that Rufus will be the people's President!" The crowd roared its approval, chanting his name; he paused to empty his glass down his parched throat. He turned to his staffers. "Can I get some water here please?"

The staff scrambled to comply. Lavinius approached him and whispered in his ear; the candidate nodded, turning to his audience.

"Ahem, ladies and gentleman, my fellow Galbadians, you'll kindly excuse me for a moment. It seems that there was an intruder in the

Palace." The mob gasped, its astonishment soon thereafter being replaced agitated verbal speculation. Rufus moved toward the balcony door, through which a guard escorted a masked figure in handcuffs and unrelieved black.

"â€|Found 'im sneakin' around the premises, tryin' to get in through a window." The soldier reported.

"Was he armed?"

"Pff, barely," The soldier laughed dismissively, indicating a small, unremarkable handgun and offering it, grip first, to Rufus, who took and proceeded to examine it with hardly latent indifference. Suddenly, he noticed somethingâ€"a small, inconspicuous insignia set in the weapon's handle.

"SeeD," He declared, and tore from the captive's shoulder a patch entirely of dullest black but clearly the symbol of that organization. "So, Leonhart sent you to rescue his terrorist cronies? You think you're a real big shot spy now, do you not? Well, certainly no longer, I strongly suspect."

The assassin merely blinked behind his mask.

"You're only a child. You're afraid, no?"

"â€|"

"Answer me." Rufus demanded.

"â€|"

He growled and yanked the ski mask from the SeeD's head, and exposed a countenance that in its bare state betrayed yet less than it had masked.

"Leonhart,"

"Let my friends go."

Rufus laughed. "Really sir, restrain yourself from uttering such ridiculous clichÃ©s, for you leave me with no choice then but to be the villain, amused by your insolence. We mustn't delude ourselves as to who is on what side."

"Do you honestly believe in this?"

"Believe! _Believe!_" He stepped toward Squall and hissed in his ear, "Let me tell you something, just between you and me and the fishes: life is one, big middle ground. Politicians exist to sustain society, and society sustains them. Society is based on law, which is based on belief. Life kills to sustain itself. Likewise, we politicians must murder our beliefs to sustain ourselves. There's no black and white in this world, hasn't been any since the first man fucked the first woman and their kids were somewhere in between one and the other. You understand? You are _never_ yourself, never were, never will be. You don't believe shit. No one does. All that separates us is the degree to which we deny that fact." He paused, having elicited no reply, stepped away and turned his back; without facing the prisoner, he continued, "I've studied you. I know you, Leonhart. You're stupid

enough to pull a stunt like this of your own accord. Do you honestly believe that you'd be here, were it not for the sorceress Heartilly?"

"I believe in her," Squall said quietly.

"Spare me," Rufus sneered. "Come now; I'll show you real mind control." He strode to the podium, the guard forcing Leonhart to follow. Again he addressed the crowd.

"My fellow Galbadians," He announced. "Palace security has apprehended an assassin on the grounds." The crowd gasped. "And not merely an assassin, a SeeD."

Pausing as the hubbub in the audience subsided, he wiped his brow and nearly drained his newly filled glass of water, as if shaken by the incident. "And not merely a SeeD," He indicated for the guard to present his prisoner to the throng. "But the infamous Squall Leonhart!" His words ignited the mob into an unmitigated frenzy.

"Kill him! Kill the terrorist!" Came their shouts. "Avenge Deling! Kill the Sorceress' knight!"

"My friends, let us not act in haste, nor to sake our bloodlust, lest we become that which we seek to rid ourselves of. But let justice be as swift as she is true, for all! Bring forth the convicted terrorists!"

Squall could not tell who of the shackled, black-shrouded prisoners was who, as they were marched out of two military trucks and lined up against the outer wall of the Presidential Palace by an equal number of rifle-armed G-soldiers. The crowd, of whom some now brandished makeshift weapons, surged against the legion of riot police surrounding the spectacle. The G-soldiers formed into a firing line opposite Zell and the Timber Owls, and presented their rifles.

"Know thisâ€"Galbadia belongs to none but herself. These foreign tyrants buy our beauraucrats, murder those few with the courage to stand against them. They are a black hand and an iron fist. They appear invincible. But they're not. They're not!" Rufus bellowed, smashing his fist against the podium and taking heaving breaths. He resumed, no longer shouting, rather nearly whispering, but whispering like a god whose full voice would smash the mortal world asunder. "And know thisâ€"nothing is stronger than their chainsâ€"nothingâ€"but those whom their chains hold in bondageâ€"you, the people!"

The horde assembled beneath him applauded wildly, their clapping and whistling, their screaming and chanting his name drowning out even the thunderous conflagration of fireworks that roared above the city.

Eventually, the cacophony subsided. He nodded to the executioners and they shouldered their weapons, taking aim at the condemned, who were then given the opportunity each to make a final statement. Lacking the ability to do so, all declined, and rather wore their shrouds with the same taciturn defiance that they had exhibited before the court. No words could have repudiated their guilt, but their silence

underscored the resolve with which they, for their cause, embraced it.

"Now," Squall whispered. Suddenly, his hands were free and held a second pistol, of late concealed inside the back of his flak jacket. He dashed toward Rufus. Seifer rounded on the guards whom he had of late imitated and fired his submachine-gun from the hip, the unexpected barrage compelling them to surrender.

Rufus froze, inhaled, and turned his head slowly to find himself staring down the barrel of a large-caliber handgun, and, beyond that, at the face of its vindictive owner. He placed both hands atop his head and turned again toward the confused and alarmed firing squad sergeant.

"Hold your fire! Lower your weapons!" The sergeant barked frantically.

"Release them," Squall whispered to Rufus, then, turning to the young sergeant, shouted, "Release the prisoners!"

"Sir?" Said the young man, seeking his superior's confirmation.

"Sergeant," Rufus commanded. "Aim."

"Aim!"

"Do you think I'm a politician because I don't love my country, Leonhart? Haven't you ever heard of the end's justifying the means?" Rufus hissed. Closing his eyes, he drew a great breath.

"Fire."

"Fire!"

At once twelve rifles cracked, ringing as a single thunderclap through the city. At once twelve faceless forms fell, as soon puppets as humans, but for the blood that, glistening, trickled down the walls and from their wounds and soaked into the grass and soil.

Rufus had not flinched when the executioners' guns had sounded, nor did he now, but faced Leonhart, fully anticipating his own execution. Squall returned his look coolly, and similarly did not flinch when a squad of Presidential Guards, having apparently dealt with Seifer, emerged from the hallway, training their guns on him and demanding that he drop his. He did not move.

He could kill Rufus—avenge his friends—but another would come. And he would have betrayed their legacy. He could try to depart with his hostage, but the Presidential Guards were more likely to put a sniper's bullet in his head, whatever the risk to their boss, than back down. And, whether or not he escaped, he would have furthered their efforts to justify a war with Garden. He really could do but one thing.

He let the gun fall from his open hand.

"Idiot," Rufus sneered. He kicked the pistol away and as soon as it had stopped clattering along the marble floor, he had drawn his own from within his coat. "Come on then. Hands up." Wordlessly, Squall complied.

The crowd was hushed.

Laughing, Rufus fired. The shot punched through the right breast of Squall's flak jacket and did not exit, but flung him onto his back. The shell casing hit the floor, peeling like a tiny bell. But rather than diminishing quickly into nothing, the high-pitched whine seemed to intensify and amplify, and rang through the heads of all in the Palace and the park like a psychic scream. Grunting, Rufus fired again.

But Squall Leonhart was gone. The spot where he had fallen was immaculate, save for a black mark where the second bullet had impacted the marble. Furiously, Rufus seized the microphone.

"People of Galbadia!" He bellowed. "Vile sorcery has thwarted us and denied us our vengeance! The murderous Leonhart yet lives! But mark my words! There shall be another day!"

But the people of Galbadia were silent.

* *

Squall woke in a bed and to the fresh, salty scent of the ocean. Fisherman's Horizon. It was day—"dawn anyhow"—though he did not know what day; he did not know how many days had passed since that night. Rising, he felt a slight, aching pain in his chest, but enough only to be a curiosity, not a discomfort. Wandering outside, he squinted from the assault of sunlight that bounced off the water and the looking-glass panels of the amphitheater and bathed the city in a glowing, golden hue.

Then, he saw her—"standing on the pier, jet-black hair indistinguishable from the silhouette of her figure against the sun. Slowly, he moved to her and joined her in admiring the view. Having never been one to watch sunrises, he rather found himself watching her. Presently, Rinoa turned to him, the sunlit regions of her face casting shadows over the other. She smiled.

"I'm glad to see you up," She said.

"Thanks," He replied. "And sorry for—"

"I know. You meant well."

"Imagine," He continued. "your being the one to rescue me."

"Hey!" She jostled him playfully. He endured her assault, and responded by taking her hand. Silently, they returned to watching and admiring. "Truly lovely, no?" She remarked.

He looked the sunrise, to the glistening water, and inhaled the clean air. He looked to her.

"Truly."

8. Epilogue and Valediction

Oak Trees and Angel Wings

Epilogue and Valediction

David James Johnston

Epilogue

“Some of us folks don't take kindly to outsiders,” The elderly man explained.

“WE won't cause any trouble, Mr. Mayor,” The young woman assured him.

“I-I know. You strike me as decent folks, j-just,” He stuttered, pulling at his white-bearded chin, searching for words to better articulate his concern. “It's just that, well, see we're an old town—I mean we're most all of past our prime. We just do things differently, and it's hard at our age getting used to your new, outsider ways. A-and, y-you could be just going 'bout your business, but it might cause kind of a stir. F-far be it from me to tell you how to live your lives, of course, b-but-”

“We'll all just have to give one another time to adjust,” She finished, black hair bobbing with her sympathetic nod.

“J-just, yeah, give us all time.” The mayor agreed. His apprehension largely evaporated when the girl removed her black sunglasses to reveal her far more honest brown eyes.

“Sir,” She said, looking him straight in the eye. “We are honored to be a part of your community. We will give this town and its people our all. Plainly, we want to be nothing than another pair of friendly faces at the marketplace.”

“Well, we're glad to have you,” The mayor said, his confidence much improved. He smiled. “On the behalf of everyone, welcome to Winhill.” He bowed and began to depart, but, stopping at the door, turned back and asked, “Say, I've been wondering: sir, being that you're such a quiet fellow I'm not sure you're this young lady's husband, yes?”

The girl looked to the young man affectionately and winked, to which he responded by putting an arm around her shoulders.

“Yes,” The boy avowed, not wishing to offend anyone's old-fashioned sensibilities.

“For going on three weeks now!” His wife added enthusiastically.

“Newlyweds, eh?”

“We certainly are,” The girl said, the young man merely shaking his head affirmatively.

“Well congratulations to the both of ye. G'day,” The mayor said, tipping his hat.

“And to you, sir,” They replied.

The door closed, and they were left to inspect their new home: they had entered into a kitchen that had been converted to seem now more akin to a pub; white sheets were draped over an amount of furniture and were in turn covered, as was everything, by a thick blanket of fine dust; cobwebs were everywhere—from the walls to the ceiling, from there to the tables, from the tables and chairs, from those to the bar, off what seemed a slight excess of old flower vases, and nearly totally blocking off the creaky, wooden staircase in the left corner of the room; from the thousands of fires that had burned beneath the blackened, marble mantel there hung in the air a permanent, smoky scent and the dark, dull wooden floor exhibited a similar, burnt quality. It was old and empty and had seen better days. They maybe had seen better days too. Irregardless they needed a place and the place needed them. It was no paradise, but then they were no angels.

Rinoa threw open the moth-eaten blinds and winced. It was nearly midday and the sun seemed to pause and greet them on its journey westward, or, more accurately perhaps, to stare as if at something grossly out of place—as if they didn't belong. And they didn't. Here, they were outsiders—aliens. Outside, they were as many different things as there were eyes to see them—lovers; murderers; heroes; fools; angels; demons; a man and woman; a boy and girl. In truth, they were all of these and more and they were none.

Squall didn't know himself, nor did Rinoa know herself. But he knew her, she knew him, and they knew that they could not have remained where they had come from. And they knew that this place could never truly be called home—they would never fully belong here. But here was better than there and it was good enough for now. It was good enough for now—the fleeting present that was ever-coming, ever-going, and ever all that they beheld, yet always gone before it could be perceived. She considered the sun, which appeared to her not as it was but as it had been some minutes earlier, and in considering she might have observed that such was the nature of all things.

For now, they were here, for all that those simple, elusive words were worth. In an instant, they would be gone from this now and gone to another. No matter how familiar this house and everything remained, none of it would ever again be entirely as it now was. They moved forever forward, unsure of where exactly they were and to where exactly they were going. Presently, the sun vanished behind a formation of clouds. But, turning from the window, she saw that he remained, and was reminded of what both knew more deeply than either could fully express—that their only

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ It is entirely fitting that I thank you, the reader, above all others.^ Someone once said that, by reading one's work, by laughing and crying as the author did in creating the piece, you make him or her to feel a little less lonely.^ I can not say it better than that.^ You simple attention is the ultimate reward for my labors.^ Thank you.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Secondly, I must thank all the friends who, through their encouragement, criticism, and their simply being there, for want of a less lame expression, helped me to see this through to the end.^ I extend my deepest gratitude to Tera, Fifi, Xedi, and Pahaso.^ Thank you all.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ But, in the end, there is only one to whom this work can be properly dedicated.^ Above all others, she deserves credit for all this.^ She was my first friend in this endeavor, and the greatest.^ She was, I do believe, the truest friend I have ever had, in whatever realm.^ She has supported, encouraged, and inspired me.^ She has at other times baffled and even terrified me, but I am grateful for everything.^ I thank her for the times when she made me feel like a genius or a hero, and for the times when she made me feel like a scared little kid.^ I thank her for never fully allowing me to understand her.^ I have grown, and this story has grown with me, due most of all to her.^ I suspect she would prefer my refraining from naming her, and I shall respect that preference.^ But if she should ever read this, she shall know that it is she of whom I speak.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Therefore, with the utmost love and respect, I dedicate Oak Trees and Angel Wings to her, and thank her sincerely.^ And, to all of you, I now bid goodnight and adieu.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ David Johnston

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ 1:23 AM

^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ May 13, 2001

End
file.